

INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES & THE 2018 ELECTION

WHAT WE LEARNED

A debrief report by

UNITE
AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

The stated desire — and desperate need — for a third force in American politics to bridge the divide between the two major parties has never been more clear. More registered voters now identify as independent than at any time in the last half-century.¹ Further, 68% of Americans believe the two parties poorly represent the American people, and that a third party is needed.²

Yet voters remain reluctant to elect independent candidates in sufficient numbers capable of significantly impacting our politics. In 2018, 431 independent candidates appeared on general election ballots for state or federal office. Only 14 were elected — and none to Governorships or to the U.S. House of Representatives.

Amid unprecedented tribalism and polarization, the 2018 election primarily served as a referendum on President Trump. In a wave year, Democrats won a record number of seats, including a majority in the U.S. House — putting a broadly desired check on the President and his party.

While the 2018 election may have served its purpose in addressing a symptom of our ailing democracy, little can be said of any progress toward electing leaders to address its root causes — leaving many voters just as concerned about our future. A December 2018 poll conducted by Unite America found that more New Hampshire voters identified political dysfunction (73%) and a lack of unity (67%) as major threats to our country than affordable healthcare (65%), the national debt (56%) and terrorism (53%).³

Reflecting & Learning

The 2012 cycle saw Republicans lose seats in both chambers of Congress and come short in winning back the White House. In response, the Grand Old Party produced an “Autopsy Report” which, among other recommendations, suggested the party refine its policy focus on cutting taxes, better engage growing Hispanic communities in key swing states, and invest more in digital and data infrastructure.⁴

The Democratic National Committee undertook a similar project after the 2016 election, although the results were not published.⁵ Commentators and interest groups weighed in too, each with their own reports touching on two fundamental questions⁶: Should the party embrace the bold, progressive policy ideas coming from its left-wing? Should base-building be focused on the rising number of minority voters or on the white working class voters who helped elect President Trump?

¹Pew Research Center, “Wide Gender Gap, Growing Educational Divide in Voters Party Identification”, Sect. 1: “[Trends in party affiliation among demographic groups](#)” (March 2018).

²Drutman, Galston, Lindberg. “[Why Americans’ Desires for a Third Party Are Unlikely to Come True](#)” (Sept 2018).

³Unite America. (2018). *New Hampshire 2020 Election Survey*. Triton Polling and Research.

Poll of 901 registered voters in NH conducted 12/04-12/05/18 with a margin of error of +/- 3.3%

⁴Republican National Committee. *Growth and Opportunity Project* (2013).

⁵Bresnahan, John and Caygle, Heather. “[House Democrats bury 2016 autopsy](#)”, *Politico* (April 2017).

⁶ See for example: [Autopsy: The Democratic Party In Crisis](#) and [The Wilderness](#)

In this report, Unite America reflects on the 2018 cycle in the same spirit of introspection with a focus on our own movement — the independent movement.

On one hand, more independent candidates than ever before ran for office, and more votes were cast for independents than at any other time in recent history. On the other, only 14 independent candidates were elected, six incumbent independent legislators lost re-election campaigns, and many credible and qualified independent candidates received single-digit percentages of the vote, including nearly every independent candidate running for statewide office.

While one would assume that growing disgust with the two major parties would create a ripe operating environment for independent candidates, we found the opposite to be true in 2018. In high-stakes elections that are increasingly impacted by the national political environment, voters opted to vote against the party they liked least — rather than reject the two-party system as a whole and try something new. This trend is likely to continue, suggested Unite America adviser and USC Professor Dan Schnur, so long as “the most visible voice in our politics (President Trump) is one forcing a binary choice.”

The 431 independent candidates who ultimately stepped forward and the 8,039,020 voters who cast ballots for those candidates have much to teach us about the future of independent politics. To that end, our report focuses on three essential threads:

FIRST, what key challenges can explain election results for independent candidates in 2018?

SECOND, how can independent candidates be more competitive in the future?

THIRD, what best practices have independent campaigns identified?

This report is informed by more than 40 polls conducted during the 2018 cycle, focus groups with voters, multiple convenings of independent candidates and their teams, survey feedback from advisers, volunteers and candidates, as well as Unite America’s efforts over the past two years.

We hope this report will provide a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities faced by independent candidates, inform organizations and movements keen to support independent candidates in the future, and provide actionable recommendations and insights for independent leaders who run for office in 2020 and beyond.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2018 election cycle saw a rise of independent voters and candidates amid both a “blue wave” that lifted Democrats to victory and a growing tribalism within the electorate that threatens the very functioning of our governing institutions. The bipolarity of the political system may have forced voters to reject many competitive and credible independent candidates out of simple fear and mistrust for the political party they like least. The first section of this report highlights these trends which shaped the 2018 political environment in which the independent candidates we analyze operated.

The second section presents a thesis on the most significant challenges independents face, including a wide gap between voters’ stated desire for a third option and their willingness to vote for one; limited brand equity in the term “independent” or in “process arguments”; and the lack of a “base” from which independents can draw support. This section also identifies conditions under which independent candidates may have a better chance, namely, when they (i) run in two way races, small districts, and/or under favorable electoral rules, and when they (ii) have as much brand equity (i.e. name identification) as candidates from the two major parties.

The third section offers recommendations for movements and organizations keen to support candidates outside of the two major parties in the future. Most importantly, priority must be placed on building a new, values-based identity capable of capturing the attention of an “Exhausted Majority” of Americans looking for a new alternative. Leveling the playing field with structural rule changes and improving access to tools, talent, and resources will be critical as well.

The fourth section offers eight best practices offered by independent candidates who appeared on the ballot in 2018. These suggestions — ranging from messaging, thoughts on how to break through in the media marketplace and how to allocate resources — provide the most actionable insights for future candidates.

The conclusion synthesizes Unite America’s role during the 2018 election and offers a vantage point from which to view a way forward in our tribal politics.

The largest hurdles for independents

The first three insights from 2018 independent campaigns may not be immediately obvious to political onlookers, commentators, or even candidates at times because they have little to do with strategy and tactics of individual campaigns, and everything to do with macro political factors at play. These three ideas enumerate the biggest challenges to independent candidates. To overcome the first requires fundamentally shifting voter psychology; the second requires candidates build strong personal brands; the third demands significant work to identify and expand the base of support for independent candidates.

Key Learning #1: There is a significant gap between voters' stated desire for an alternative and their voting behavior.

Pre-election polling demonstrated a strong interest in voting for independent leaders — often over 70% — and favorability towards specific independent candidates. Nationally, the desire for a third party has never been higher. Yet 2018 proved to be a tough year for credible independents, who lost competitive races at all levels of government. We identify at least three core ideas that can help explain the difference between what voters say they want and what they ultimately cast ballots for:

First, social desirability bias explains why many voters report an openness to voting for an independent candidate or a desire for a third party even if they are unlikely to ever support one.

Second, party labels provide a useful heuristic to voters in indicating a candidate's general policy priorities, leaving a significant gap for independent candidates to close over the course of their campaign. Further, explaining why the political system is broken and how one independent candidate on their ballot can make a difference was difficult for independent candidates in 2018.

Third, agreement with the idea of voting for a third candidate in a poll does not reflect how intensely one believes in that assertion. Ultimately, moderates tend to believe in moderation much more moderately than activists on the ideological extremes believe in their brands of liberalism and conservatism. Partially as a result of a lack of intensity, even well-grounded support for independent candidates tends to evaporate by election day, as voters' partisanship becomes hyper-charged.

Key Learning #2: The “independent” brand does not carry any meaningful, built-in support on the ballot.

The independent” brand is at best an empty vessel that each individual candidate and campaign must define on their own. Independent candidates who rely solely on their ballot designation and do not run robust campaigns, usually earn only one to three percent of the vote.

Critically, voters require concrete, assertive stances on the issues that affect their lives, rather than only commentary on the obvious malfunctioning of a polarized, party-driven government. The ability to find a singular contrast issue to compare with the incumbent and/or other opponent(s) has propelled a number of successful independent candidates to office.

Key Learning #3: Independent voters are nowhere near a cohesive voting base for independent candidates.

A majority of independent voters lean towards — or even have strong affiliations with — one of the two major parties. Even those who believe we need a third party do not agree on what that third party should

be; only about a third of these voters desire a “party of the center.”⁷ Post-election polls even showed independent candidates in some key two-way races *lost* amongst independent voters.

In the political environment as it exists today, there is no evidence of a cohesive coalition of voters simply waiting for the opportunity to cast their ballots for leaders who run outside the parties and broadly promise to rise above petty partisanship to solve problems.

Where independents have the best shot

The second set of takeaways suggests under which political circumstances independent candidates are more likely to win. It’s also important to emphasize that in politics — especially for independents — paths to victory are often defined by the specific candidates on the ballot and the unique circumstances of the election.

Key Learning #4: Two way races are exponentially better than three way races.

Independent candidates in two way races begin with a significantly larger support base. Voters from the party without a candidate on the ballot often view the independent as the best way to cast a ballot against the party they like least. A growing literature suggests that negative attitudes towards the “other” party are stronger than positive attitudes towards one’s own party.

Candidates in two way races still face significant challenges, including motivating voters not to skip the election on their ballot when they don’t see a candidate from their preferred party as well as building a coalition in districts which often significantly favor one party, either because of self-sorting of the electorate or partisan gerrymandering.

Key Learning #5: Favorable electoral rules may help, but are not silver bullets.

Ranked Choice Voting is an alternative voting method that allows voters to rank their candidates in order of preference so that voters can choose their preferred candidate without fear of “wasting” their vote or “spoiling” an election.

In Maine, Ranked Choice Voting was used for the first time to elect federal candidates in 2018. State Representative Marty Grohman (I) ran a credible campaign for the first congressional district, earning 9% of the vote. Pre-election polling and post-election focus groups suggest that Ranked Choice Voting did not significantly change the electoral outcomes because previously identified hurdles (i.e. voter psychology, brand identity and lack of competitive infrastructure) prevailed.

Ranked Choice Voting did not persuade voters to vote for Representative Grohman if they did not already know who he was, nor did Ranked Choice Voting propel Representative Grohman further than most other

⁷ Lee Drutman, William Galston, and Tod Lindberg, New America, *Spoiler Alert: Why Americans’ Desire for a Third Party are Unlikely to Come True* (Sept 2018).

independent candidates; instead, it helped at the margins for the relatively small number of voters who would have otherwise voted for a major party candidate out of fear of wasting a vote or spoiling an election.

In Vermont, Independent Representative Ben Jickling earned 25% of the vote in his successful re-election campaign. Ten states use multi-member districts in a variety of formats, allowing voters to choose one candidate in elections in which multiple win. If the challenge for independents is that only a narrow set of voters — those not represented by either political party — are willing to vote for them when both major parties are on the ballot, multi-member districts may provide a unique political opportunity.

Top-two primaries offer independents a path to victory if they can advance through primaries in slightly partisan districts.

Independents running for state legislature have also fared far better in smaller districts, where it is easier to personally reach and persuade a larger percentage of voters.

Key Learning #6: Strong candidates with favorable political dynamics can take advantage of unique electoral opportunities.

In 2018, Angus King was re-elected in a three-way race to a second term as an independent to the United States Senate; he previously served two terms as Governor. A well-known public television host, Senator King won his first statewide race in 1994 by only 7,878 votes.

Jim Roscoe, a former Democratic state representative, won in a heavily Republican Wyoming district by finding a contrast issue his community cared deeply about. By pointing out a vote the incumbent legislator took to permit the sale of public lands to the state, Roscoe drove a wedge between him and his opponent on a salient and local issue that had a tangible impact on people's lives.

Previously, Governor Jesse Ventura (MN) won a close three-way election in 1998 and U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski (AK) won as a third, *write-in* candidate in 2010. Governor Bill Walker (AK) won his race in 2014 when the Democratic nominee joined Walker as his lieutenant governor candidate on a “Unity Ticket.” Each time, these candidates were able to build name recognition and a personal identity as strong — or stronger — than the political parties and their nominated candidates.

What independent candidates will need to do in the future

Legislators who have served independent of the two major political parties have demonstrated the power to bridge the growing partisan divide and advance common-sense solutions that improve the lives of their constituents. Therefore it remains a worthwhile endeavor to recruit, train, and support courageous leaders who run outside of the two major parties.

As the key learnings suggest, the biggest challenge independent candidates face is tapping into an initial, built-in base of electoral support as do major party candidates. A second challenge is that independents

lack competitive electoral infrastructure capable of electing them, even in favorable electoral conditions. Finally, independents must overcome an electoral system with rules generally written to benefit candidates from the party establishment.

Outlined below are three critical tasks for both independent candidates and movements supporting them to address.

Task #1: Build an identity

Leading research by Drew Westen,⁸ Dr. Lilliana Mason,⁹ Jonathan Haidt,¹⁰ More in Common,¹¹ and many others demonstrate the role emotion, strong political identities, and shifting belief systems play in dividing the country into polarized tribes. These tribes are powerful political forces capable of using social pressure and ethos appeals, often not rooted in fact or reason, to mobilize voters. Most believe these trends are self-reinforcing and will grow more powerful over time. Therefore, any future candidates or institutions looking to compete with the two major parties must invest significant energy in understanding these forces and developing their own identity that can transcend existing ones.

A new identity must not simply propose “centrist” policy positions; more importantly, it must characterize a new type of leader — or coalition of leaders — committed to a set of values and offer a fundamentally new direction for our politics.

Task #2: Level the playing field

A number of proposed electoral reforms could help both the electability of independents as well as improve governance in other ways. After its successful implementation in Maine, Ranked Choice Voting has seen increased interest within the political reform community and would eliminate the spoiler argument, a critical messaging challenge for independents. Multi-member districts — in which independents have won in Vermont — could also help level the playing field.

David Brooks, the New York Times columnist, recently wrote:

“Right now our politics is heading in a truly horrendous direction — with vicious, binary political divisions overlapping with and exacerbating historical racial divisions. If we’re going to have just one structural reform to head off that nightmare, ranked-choice voting in multimember districts is the one to choose.”¹²

Yet, there are at least five specific ways in which state constitutions, laws, and regulations make it harder for independent candidates to compete with major-party endorsed candidates: First, ballot access

⁸ Westen, Drew. *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (2008).

⁹ Mason, Lilliana *Uncivil Agreement*

¹⁰ Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2013).

¹¹ More In Common (2017)

¹² Brooks, David. “[One Reform to Save America](#)”, *New York Times* (2018).

requirements are often higher for independent candidates. Second, in many states, party committees often can raise funds in unlimited amounts and make contributions to candidates in their party, while independent candidates do not have access to a similar mechanism. Third, nine states use Straight Party Voting, which allows voters to check one box or pull a single lever to vote for an entire slate of party members. Fourth, sore loser laws prohibit potential independent candidates from running in general elections. Fifth, the identification of party affiliation of candidates on ballots provides candidates from the two-major parties an inherent and very valuable branding advantage over leaders running unaffiliated from any political party. Legislative advocacy, as well as carefully designed legal challenges, will be required to tackle these obstacles.

At the presidential level, ballot access and the role of money are especially important. In California, for example, a third party or independent presidential candidate must collect 196,000 valid signatures in 105 days after nominating his or her Vice Presidential nominee. Independent candidates are also not allowed to participate in the presidential Clean Elections campaign finance program. Opening debates to third party and independent candidates would also meaningfully level the playing field.

Task #3: Improve Infrastructure

Both political parties have built data platforms that append and enrich voter data in real time. Their networks of activists and staffers pick up on key themes and tactics, carrying them from one election to the next. Donor lists are built from work done by previous candidates and organizations.

The primary focus of Unite America's efforts in the 2018 cycle was building competitive electoral infrastructure to support 30 endorsed leaders who were identified as credible, aligned, and viable candidates. The efforts of the movement included raising both "hard" and "soft" dollars, mobilizing volunteers, building a brand, driving media attention, connecting campaigns to operatives and vendors, and providing data infrastructure.

Independent candidates identified grassroots volunteers and early financial resources as the two most valuable assets in building capacity within their own campaigns. Therefore building a more robust supporter network must remain an essential task for organizations keen to support independent candidates.

Best Practices from 2018 independent candidates

One challenge for independent candidates is that the insights and data collected from cycle to cycle are often lost. We surveyed over 30 independent candidates who ran in 2018 to ask what they learned and what advice they would pass along to future candidates. In those surveys, candidates identified engaged volunteers and early money as the most critical components of their campaign infrastructure. They also offered insights into how independents can develop a strong platform, overcome the spoiler argument, and share their message with voters and the press. Topline recommendations include:

- **TAKE ISSUE POSITIONS.** Many voters are sympathetic to “process arguments” that blame the two party system and gridlock for a lack of progress on issues that matter to them, but are ultimately unpersuaded by these arguments alone. Critically, independent candidates must take bold, differentiated policy positions and offer concrete ideas that would positively impact people’s lives.
- **HAVE A PLAN TO GET TO A TWO WAY RACE.** While independents can, and have, won three way races, those instances are rare and usually rely on a candidate having exceptional name recognition and personal brand identity. Any independent campaign strategy should include working to position the candidate as the most viable and electable alternative to the incumbent or incumbent party, to “flip the script” on the traditional spoiler argument and instead pressure the other party to not run or meaningfully support their own candidate.
- **INVEST IN GROUND GAME.** Independent candidates rely heavily on persuading voters, so investing resources in a strong ground game is critical. State legislative candidates noted candidate door-to-door canvassing as the best way to reach and engage voters. Statewide candidates suggested investing more resources in paid, regional staff capable of building capacity within campaigns.
- **BUILD PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE PRESS.** The partisan media environment demands building personal relationships with local reporters and commentators, in part to overcome the conventional wisdom that third candidates are not viable or out of the mainstream. Nurturing these relationships, telling a compelling personal story, and having concrete policy ideas are critical to capturing the public’s attention through earned media.
- **SPEND RESOURCES EARLY TO ENSURE RECOGNITION.** Independent candidates have the burden of proactively demonstrating they are viable candidates. This must be done early in the race before the media, pollsters, and voters begin to conceptualize the race as a two-way competition. Therefore independent candidates should spend financial resources as early as possible to legitimize their campaign, build their name recognition, drive up their poll numbers, and prove their electability.
- **REJECT THE PREMISE OF THE SPOILER ARGUMENT.** Especially in three way races, the toughest messaging challenge is the “spoiler argument” which holds independents will only throw the election to one major party candidate or the other. Independents must turn this argument on its head, noting that the only way to “spoil” a rotten system is to vote for the same types of partisan candidates who have gridlocked government. They can also point to the fact that less than 2% of races are spoiled by independent candidates and that new electoral reforms like Ranked Choice Voting are capable of preventing unintended outcomes.¹³

¹³ Bump, Philip. “[How often do third-party candidates actually spoil elections? Almost never.](#)” *Washington Post* (2014).

SECTION I: SETTING THE STAGE: THE 2018 ELECTION

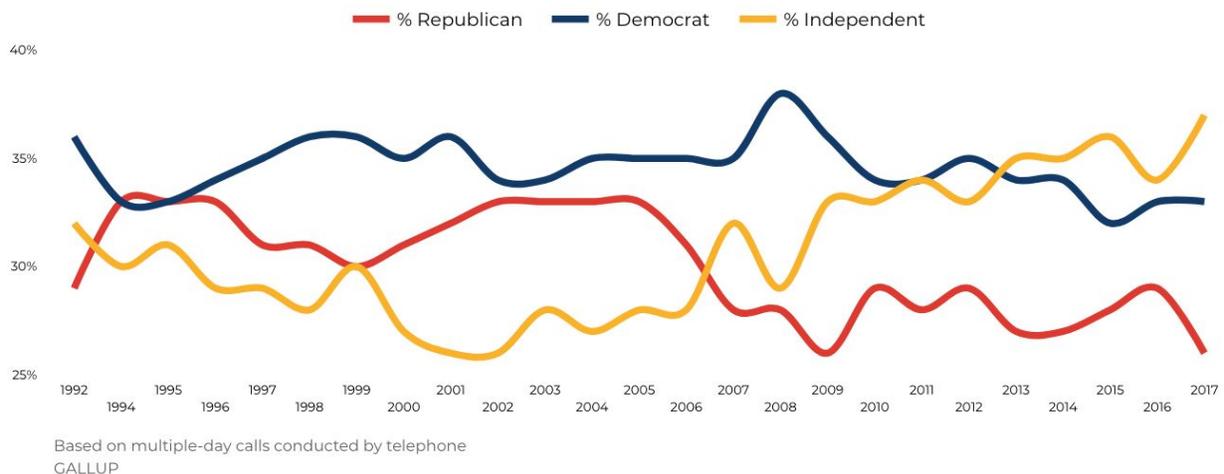
Before drawing conclusions from the independent campaigns of 2018, it is important to note three key trends in our evolving political system.

FIRST, during the 2018 election cycle, the community of independent voters and candidates grew to unprecedented levels. In nine of the 30 states that collect party affiliations from voters, the number of political independents now outnumber both Republican and Democratic party membership. In seven other states, independent voters outnumber at least one of the major parties.¹⁴ Further, 37% of Americans now self-identify as political independents, the highest share since 1990, when Pew first began tracking partisan affiliation.¹⁵

figure 1

PARTY IDENTIFICATION TRENDS

1992-2017



A record number of independents served in office in 2017 and 2018, as well. In 2018, 27 independents were serving in state legislatures, including 11 who had left their party within the past two years. An August 2018 report by the Unite America Institute documented how these legislators, as well as

¹⁴ Independent Voter Project, [State-by-State Primary Elections Map](#).

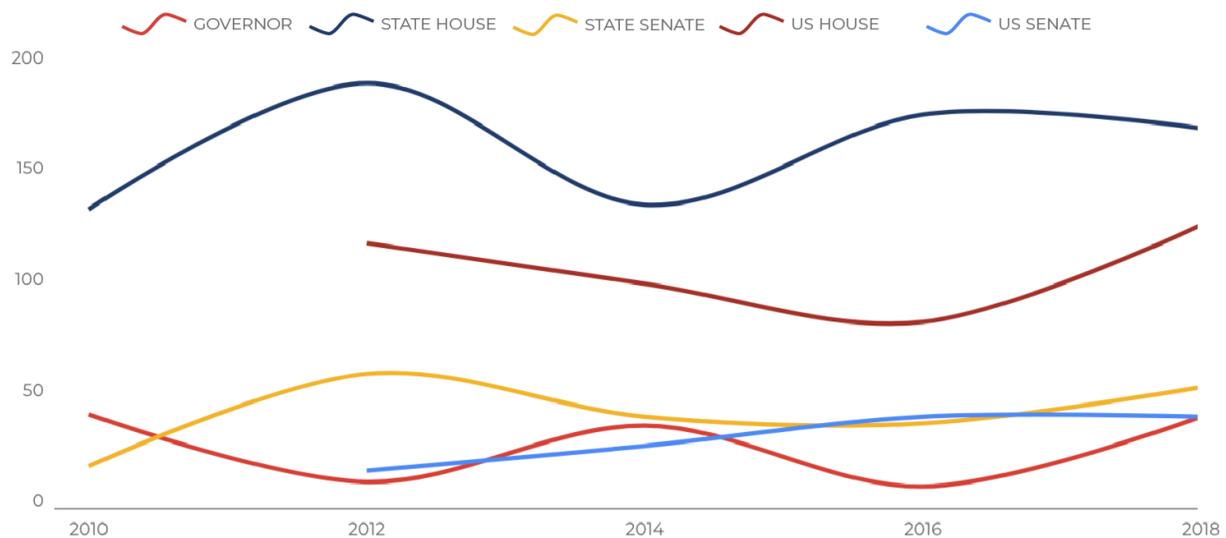
¹⁵ Pew Research Center, “Wide Gender Gap, Growing Educational Divide in Voters’ Party Identification” (March 2018).

independent Governor Bill Walker (I-AK), were effectively serving in office.¹⁶ As a final indicator of the growth of the independent movement in 2018, 431 independent candidates ran for state legislature, Congress, or Governor. This community far surpasses the 347 who ran in 2016 and is a record high for any time in the last decade.¹⁷

figure 2

NUMBER OF INDEPENDENTS RUNNING FOR OFFICE

2010 - 2018



SECOND, activists within the Democratic Party built a resistance to an increasingly divisive President Trump. A “blue wave” resulted in the single largest increase in Democratic control of state and federal legislatures since 1974.¹⁸ In Congress, Democrats won 41 seats previously held by Republicans, while only ceding five.¹⁹ At the state legislative level, Democrats won 308 more seats than they previously controlled.²⁰

¹⁶ Unite America Institute, [Reimagining Governance in an Age of Polarization: Power & Potential of Independent Legislators](#) (August 2018).

¹⁷ Ballotpedia data provided to Unite America.

¹⁸ Montanaro, Domenico. [“It Was A Big, Blue Wave: Democrats Pick Up Most House Seats In A Generation”](#). *NPR* (Nov 2018).

¹⁹ Chinni, Dante and Bronston, Sally. [“Was it a wave election? Depends on your data set”](#), *NBC News* (Nov 2018).

²⁰ Ballotpedia, [State legislative elections 2018](#)

THIRD, the rise of straight-party voting behavior has mostly rendered elections, as the Cook Political Report's David Wasserman observed, less as contests between two candidates and more as a census on where Democrats and Republicans live. Across racial, religious, and cultural lines, political "mega-identities" have sorted Americans into two major tribes.²¹ These two groups increasingly dominate political discourse to the dismay of an exhausted, ideologically diverse majority who feel forgotten and fed up with the current state of our politics.²² Post-election polling shows that anywhere from 33%²³ to 66%²⁴ of voters supported candidates from only one of the two major parties.

While politics remains a local sport, the game is increasingly impacted by national forces.²⁵ Personality and policy increasingly matter less, as the tribalism of national politics sways voting decisions.

²¹ Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How politics became our identity* (April 2018).

²² Hidden Tribes, "[The Exhausted Majority](#)" *The Hidden Tribes of America* (Oct 2018).

²³ Unite America. (2018). "Colorado House District 59 Post Election Survey" Triton Polling & Research.
Poll conducted amongst 400 CO HD 59 voters from 11/9-11/18/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.9%
See page 20 for a full overview. Note: there was an independent candidate on the ballot for state house.

²⁴ Unite America. "New Hampshire 2020 Election Survey". *Triton Polling and Research* (2018).
Poll of 901 registered voters in NH conducted 12/04-12/05/18 with a margin of error of +/- 3.3%

²⁵ Drutman, Lee. "[America has local political institutions but nationalized politics. This is a problem.](#)" *Vox* (May 2018).

CASE STUDY: PAUL JONES

Of the 6,073 state legislative seats up for election nationally in 2018,²⁶ one race in southwest Colorado with a unique set of circumstances best illustrates the challenges facing independent candidates. This race is useful because the candidates had comparable electoral support, competed in a “toss up” district, and were seen about equally as favorably by voters.

Colorado House District 59, gerrymandered following the 2010 elections, stretches over 200 miles from its northeast corner in Gunnison to its population center in Durango. In 2012, Democrat Mike McLachlan won with 51.1% of the vote against incumbent Republican J. Paul Brown. Two years later, Brown ran again, unseating McLachlan with 50.2% of the vote. In 2016, Barbara McLachlan, wife to Mike McLachlan, won the seat with 50.7% of the vote.

As far as toss-ups go, this district is as close as it gets.

A hiccup by the local Republican Party during its nominating process meant no Republican appeared on the general election ballot in 2018. That presented a unique opportunity to a recently retired game warden, Paul Jones, to run in a two-way race and potentially become the first independent elected to the state legislature in over 100 years.

The ensuing campaign and post-election survey of 400 voters demonstrated the following:

- **INDEPENDENT VOTERS ARE NOT A BUILT-IN BASE OF SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES.** Despite findings that 85% of Coloradans — including 92% of independents — were open to supporting an independent candidate,²⁷ Paul Jones only received 44% of the vote, losing independents by a margin of 54% to 29%.²⁸ While other independent candidates can and have performed better among independent voters, the “independent” brand does not come with a built-in base of support. Other well-funded and organized independent candidates across Colorado only earned 3-6% of the vote in three-way races.
- **NEGATIVE PARTISANSHIP AND TRIBALISM ARE DRIVING VOTER BEHAVIOR.** Based on open-ended survey responses, a majority of voters who supported Jones reported their decisions were driven more by negative attitudes towards the Democratic Party and the liberal incumbent, than by an affinity towards Jones or his independent approach. This finding aligns with nationwide research which shows voters have stronger negative views of the opposing

²⁶ Ballotpedia, [State legislative elections, 2018](#) (2018).

²⁷ Unite America Institute, [“Colorado’s Sleeping Giant: Independent Voters and Candidates”](#) (August 2017)
Poll by Triton Polling & Research from 8/21-9/10/2017 with 2,026 respondents and a margin of error of +/- 2.2%

²⁸ Unite America. “Colorado House District 59 Post Election Survey” *Triton Polling & Research* (2018).
Poll conducted amongst 400 CO HD 59 voters from 11/9-11/18/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.9%.

party than positive views of their own.²⁹

- **THE ABILITY TO BREAK THROUGH THE TWO PARTY SYSTEM AS AN INDEPENDENT MATTERS TO SOME VOTERS, BUT PERSONAL QUALIFICATIONS AND SPECIFIC POLICY ISSUES MATTER MORE.** While some voters — especially those fed up with the two major parties — are excited to vote for an independent, a majority of the support for Jones’ campaign came from those who aligned with his policy positions or appreciated his background as a lifelong Coloradan, game-warden, and father.
- **THOSE NOT REPRESENTED BY EITHER POLITICAL PARTY PROVIDE A BASE.** Without a Republican in the race, it was not surprising that Jones won conservatives (+37%), Republican-leaning independents (+40%), and men (+7%). However, he lost independents (-25%), moderates (-25%), and even people who agreed with the statement that “elected leaders mostly serve parties and special interests” (-10%). Jones, however, did win one notable constituency: those who do not feel well represented by either political party (+14%).
- **COMPETITIVE INFRASTRUCTURE IS NOT ENOUGH.** In total, \$289,997.41 was spent by or on behalf of Paul Jones’ candidacy. Volunteers and staff knocked over 15,000 doors. Jones had access to campaign staff, voter data, and sophisticated voter models. While impossible to analyze whether the “infrastructure” was marginally better or worse, it is fair to say the infrastructure was comparable.

The race was close enough to suggest that, under different circumstances, an independent could win a two-way race in HD 59. A combination of any of the following factors may have produced a different result on election day:

- **A LESS POPULAR OR MORE DIVISIVE OPPONENT.** A long-time educator in the most populated city in the district, McLachlan did not face a primary challenger and benefited from running as the incumbent. She was viewed favorably across the district and especially within her party. A pre-election poll four months before election day found she was viewed favorably by 40% of the electorate and unfavorable by only 26%. At the same time, only 11% of voters reported having enough information to have a favorable or unfavorable view of Jones.

Further, McLachlan’s campaign successfully defined her as a bipartisan member of the legislature in the press,³⁰ despite the fact that she voted 98% of the time with her party leadership during her

²⁹ Pew Research Center. “The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider” Section 8: “[Partisan animosity, personal politics, views of Trump](#)” (Oct 2017).

³⁰ Armijo, Patrick, “[State House District 59 race: Bipartisanship takes center stage](#),” *The Durango Herald* (Oct 2018).

first term in office.³¹ A brief exchange during a campaign debate provides an anecdote for how the issued played out:

Representative McLachlan: *“I see working with the Democratic and Republican parties as working with the team. As an independent, who in the world is on your team?”*

Paul Jones: *“The people of my district. That’s my team.”*

- **A DIFFERENT POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT.** President Trump dominated political airwaves during the 2018 election, creating a binary choice for many voters: vote for Trump and his party, or vote against him. Southwest Coloradans asked Jones, his team, and volunteers about the president and what Jones thought about the immigration “crisis” more often than they asked about any specific policy issue likely to be addressed by the Colorado state legislature.

Further, the “blue wave” lifted some Democrats to office; progressive canvassers in HD 59 focused their efforts on voter turnout for an entire slate of Democratic candidates endorsed by the state party. Instead of making specific pitches for Representative McLachlan, canvassers were focused on getting voters to turnout for Democrats more broadly. Meanwhile, Jones’ campaign and organizations supporting him had to first get voters to care about a race that appeared far down on their ballot before beginning to persuade them to vote for a political independent.

- **A CLEAR CONTRAST ISSUE.** In over 325 responses from voters in a post-election survey, it did not appear a single voter was motivated by a specific policy issue on which the candidates had different opinions. While some voters noted they were motivated by Jones’ desire for lower taxes or McLachlan’s support of public education, the candidates did not necessarily take clearly differentiated positions on these issues.

In a Denver Post interview, Jones was asked “What three policy issues set you apart from your opponent(s)?” to which he responded:

“I am not sure how to answer this question. My opponent’s voting record is very partisan, supporting the Denver based Democratic leadership 98.6% of the time, and in accepting significant contributions from a variety of PACs and special interest groups. Yet in recent public statements she is attempting to move her record back to the center.

There is no Republican in the race, so specific policy issue differences will be hard to define as the goal posts move. I think the biggest difference will be our approach. Her approach has been to be a partisan loyalist.”³²

³¹ Colorado General Assembly, *Journal of the House of Representatives of Colorado*, 71st Assembly, 1st session, 2017; Colorado General Assembly, *Journal of the House of Representatives of Colorado*, 71st Assembly, 2nd session, 2018.

³² “Colorado House District 59 candidate Q&A”, *The Denver Post* (Oct 2018).

Asked the same question, Representative McLachlan responded: “I was waiting to answer this until after the Club 20 debates, as I do not know where my opponent stands on most issues. It still is not clear to me.”

Especially in local elections, finding a single contrast policy issue to focus campaign messaging around can be an effective tactic for any candidate challenging an incumbent. Even more powerful is when the challenger can point to specific vote(s) demonstrating the incumbent voted against the interest of her constituents. In Colorado House District 59 in 2018, a single contrast issue — if it even existed — never became apparent to voters.

THE DATA FROM COLORADO’S HOUSE DISTRICT 59

Colorado’s House District 59 became a testing ground for new organizations supporting independent candidates. Meanwhile, well-established political groups eager to re-elect an incumbent who they believed had represented the district well also invested significant resources. The two sides collectively spent \$798,233.13 on the seat in 2018, generally making voters aware of the names on the ballot for state house. A post-election poll found 70% of respondents were familiar with the Paul Jones campaign and 78% were familiar with the Barbara McLachlan campaign.³³

table 1

CO HD-59 Results

2012 - 2018

| Year | Incumbent | | Challenger | |
|------|------------------------------|--------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| | Name | Percentage | Name | Percentage |
| 2012 | J. Paul Brown (R) | 48.9% | Mike McLachlan (D) | 51.1% |
| 2014 | Mike McLachlan (D) | 49.8% | J. Paul Brown (R) | 50.2% |
| 2016 | J. Paul Brown (R) | 49.2% | Barbara McLachlan (D) | 50.7% |
| 2018 | Barbara McLachlan (D) | 56.0% | Paul Jones (I) | 44.0% |

³³ Unite America. “Colorado House District 59 Post Election Survey”, *Triton Polling & Research* (2018). Poll conducted amongst 400 CO HD 59 voters from 11/9-11/18/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.9%.

table 2

THE ROLE OF MONEY

2018 CO HD-59 SPENDING BREAKDOWN

| 2018 Election Colorado House District 59 | Democrat Barbara McLachlan | Independent Paul Jones |
|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Candidate Spending | \$149,852.20 | \$27,909.12 |
| Outside Group Spending | \$358,385.52 | \$262,088.29 |
| Total | \$508,235.72 | \$289,997.41 |

The role of money in politics became a seemingly important issue throughout the campaign. McLachlan’s campaign, and the organizations supporting her, emphasized that a majority of Jones’ campaign contributions came from out of state. The Jones campaign, and organizations supporting him, emphasized that McLachlan accepted more than \$100,000 from special interest groups and corporations.

Nationwide, the role of money in politics has become an important issue to voters who identify it as a threat to our political system and civil society. In HD 59, 50% of voters reported the role of “big money in politics” as a very important issue. Yet, only 10% of voters reported that Jones’ out of state money even “somewhat” influenced their vote; 15.1% reported that Representative McLachlan’s special interest contributions did the same. When asked specifically why votes were cast for Jones or McLachlan, only a handful of voters pointed to the role of money in the campaign.

BIOGRAPHY AND POLICY MATTERED MOST

Post-election polling indicates that party identity, the backgrounds of the candidates, and their specific policy stances shaped the outcome more than the sources of campaign funds. For example, expanding the middle class (84%), securing access to affordable healthcare (81%), improving infrastructure (82%), and providing more small business opportunities (78%), were ultimately much more important issues to voters than the role of big money in politics (50%).

table 3

ISSUE PRIORITIES

| Of the following issues, which ones are very important, important or somewhat important, or not very important issues to you? ³⁴ | | | | |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Statement | Not Very Important | Somewhat Important | Important | Very important |
| Supporting the middle class on the Western Slope | 3.4% | 11.5% | 22.6% | 61.2% |
| Roads and infrastructure | 1.0% | 16.0% | 34.1% | 48.4% |
| Healthcare access and affordability | 7.0% | 10.5% | 14.3% | 66.8% |
| Expanding opportunities for small businesses | 3.4% | 17.7% | 25.9% | 52.3% |
| Responsible conservation to protect public lands and the environment. | 5.3% | 16.4% | 21.4% | 56.6% |
| Standing up to Denver special interests | 7.2% | 12.5% | 18.4% | 57.7% |
| Supporting our Western Slope way of life | 7.5% | 14.0% | 20.9% | 51% |
| Expanded public school spending | 18.6% | 16.1% | 18.6% | 43.9% |
| Protecting our 2nd Amendment right to bear arms | 33.8% | 11.2% | 6.8% | 47.2% |
| Electing an independent representative who will put people over party. Not tied to either party. | 18.1% | 23.8% | 23.5% | 30.1% |
| Big Money in politics | 28.1% | 15.1% | 16.1% | 33.7% |

Jones won three counties in total: Hinsdale, Archuleta, and his home county of Gunnison, which he won by a five point margin. A lifelong Coloradan who had served his local community and married a public school teacher, two polls before election day and one after showed Paul was much more well known in Gunnison than he was elsewhere. The importance of building name recognition and brand awareness for independents can not be overstated, as personal familiarity can help overcome partisan voting habits.

A post-election survey asked voters why they chose their respective candidates. The personal biographies and policy positions of both candidates mattered most. Especially for Jones' supporters, the role of negative partisanship was evident. Of surveyed voters who reported voting for Jones, just as many reported doing so because he was not a Democrat (32) or because they did not like the incumbent (14) as reported doing so because they liked his biography or policy positions (46).

³⁴ Unite America. "Survey of Colorado 59th State Representative District", *Triton Polling & Research* (2018). Poll conducted amongst 539 CO HD 59 voters from 7/20-7/25/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.2%.

table 4

SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENT PAUL JONES

| “Why did you support Paul Jones?”³⁵ <i>(Asked only of survey respondents who reported voting for Independent Paul Jones)</i> | | |
|---|------------------|---|
| Broad Category | # of Respondents | Illustrative Examples |
| I like Paul's story or policy positions | 46 | “I read his online biography” “I thought he would be the better person” “There were just a few issues that seemed to be more aligned and favorable to my views” “Off the grid more independent thinking” “Don't want to expand healthcare” “People trust him” “I spoke with him” “He seem to represent my ideas” |
| Paul was not a Democrat | 32 | “He wasn't a Democrat” “I didn't want a Democrat in office” “He is the lesser of the two evils” “He was running against democrats” |
| I do not like Barbara McLachlan | 14 | “Because he wasn't Barbara” “I have concerns about Barbra special interest connections” “I'm not happy with her voting record” “Didn't agree with Barbara stance on taxes” |
| I think he can breakthrough the system as an independent | 27 | “I am tired of the BS that is happen between the two parties” “Seemed as he could breakthrough party lines” “He wasn't a Democrat or a Republican” “Wouldn't be tied to any party” |
| I am a conservative who votes Republican | 7 | “Conservative values” “Because there was no Republican” |
| Total | 126 | |

³⁵ Unite America. “Colorado House District 59 Post Election Survey”, *Triton Polling & Research* (2018). Poll conducted amongst 400 CO HD 59 voters from 11/9-11/18/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.9%.

table 5

SUPPORT FOR DEMOCRAT BARBARA MCLACHLAN

| “Why did you support Barbara McLachlan?”³⁶ <i>(Asked only of survey respondents who reported voting for Democrat Barbara McLachlan)</i> | | |
|--|------------------|--|
| Broad Category | # of Respondents | Illustrative Examples |
| I like Barbara’s story or policy positions | 138 | “Her beliefs aligned with mine” “She’s done a good job” “She’s an educator. I like her views” “She’s working for the people” “Because she is local I heard a lot about her over the course of her first term, so I knew more about her.” |
| I’m a progressive who supports Democrats | 46 | “She is a Democrat” “Voted a straight ticket” “I voted most all Democrats because of Trump” |
| I can’t vote for Republicans | 14 | “I didn’t want a Republican” “Tired of the Republican Party” |
| I did not like Paul Jones | 4 | “I wasn’t impressed with Paul Jones” “Negative ads about Paul Jones” “It was in opposition of Paul.” |
| Total | 202 | |

Asked why voters *did not* vote for Jones, some common themes emerged, including the fact that voters did not know much about Jones or that they did not think he could win. Yet affinity towards the Democratic party, a dislike of President Trump, and specific policy issues clearly motivated voters much more.

THE BASE OF SUPPORT

The post-election survey also provides insight into the “base of support” for independent candidates. Jones lost independent voters, but he won a majority of the 25% of the population who did not feel well represented by the two major parties. So while *a majority of voters* know the system is broken and are calling for change, there is still a *substantial constituency* willing to vote for a new way, even if that constituency is not a majority or a plurality.

³⁶ Ibid.

table 6

VOTING BEHAVIOR

| Voter Segment | Share of electorate | Reported Voting Behavior in CO HD 59 | | | |
|---|---------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| | | Can't Recall | Left Blank | Voted Jones (I) | Voted McLachlan (D) |
| Self-identified Democrats | 33.0% | 1.5% | 0.9% | 9.0% | 88.6% |
| Self-identified liberals or progressives | 21.1% | 5.0% | 1.9% | 7.9% | 85% |
| Voted for Democrat Jared Polis for Governor | 45.0% | 1.0% | 0.6% | 11.1% | 87.3% |
| Independents who lean Democrat | 9.4% | 4.1% | 0.0% | 14.2% | 81.7% |
| Women | 53.0% | 8.0% | 7.1% | 24.5% | 60.5% |
| People who reported voting for an "about even" number of Republicans and Democrats | 8.2% | 9.1% | 9.8% | 24.4% | 56.7% |
| Self-identified moderates | 27.1% | 6.6% | 5.8% | 31.3% | 56.2% |
| All self-identified Independents | 34.0% | 11.6% | 6.2% | 28.7% | 53.5% |
| Self-identified Independents who do not lean to either party | 52.3% | 11.2% | 7.2% | 29.3% | 52.3% |
| Respondents who said the most important factor to picking candidates was their ability to break through partisan gridlock | 34.6% | 7.7% | 9.0% | 30.6% | 52.6% |
| Heard about Paul Jones' campaign | 71.0% | 4.9% | 4.3% | 36.2% | 54.7% |
| Respondents who said the most important factor to picking candidates was alignment on the issues that matter most to them | 56.6% | 10.1% | 5.9% | 35.2% | 48.8% |
| Heard nothing about Paul Jones' campaign | 29.0% | 17.7% | 16% | 27.9% | 38.5% |
| Respondents who said elected leaders mostly serve the parties and special interests instead of the people | 72.6% | 9.5% | 7.3% | 36.5% | 46.7% |
| Men | 47.0% | 10.8% | 10.2% | 42.7% | 36.3% |
| Do not feel well represented by either political party | 24.9% | 14.2% | 8.6% | 45.4% | 31.8% |
| Self identified conservatives | 25.6% | 9.1% | 15.6% | 56.0% | 19.3% |
| Self-identified Independents who lean Republican | 5.0% | 21.3% | 8.0% | 55.5% | 15.3% |
| Voted for Republican Walker Stapleton for Governor | 43.0% | 10.5% | 15.9% | 57.1% | 16.5% |

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|--------------|-------|-------|
| Self identified Republicans | 31.0% | 13.9% | 17.4% | 56.9% | 11.8% |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|--------------|-------|-------|

It is important to recognize this nuance within the large group of voters who perceive the political system to be broken. While it may seem like this large "broken system" group is a built-in constituency for independents, only a fraction of these voters align with the fundamental change that independents represent. Most of these "broken system" voters still vote for candidates from one of the major parties — seemingly because they believe the system would be fixed if only the opposition party would agree to the changes proposed by those voters’ preferred party.

Somewhat related, moderate and independent voters who do not lean towards one ideology or party affiliation were not a built-in base of support for Jones. According to the survey, Jones lost those shares of the electorate by 24.9% and 23.0%, respectively. These moderate and independent voters, more so than voters on the ideological extremes, are most likely to be compelled to vote based on candidate qualifications and policy positions.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that 17% of Republican survey respondents did not vote in the state house election, while only 1% of Democrat respondents reported doing the same. This means partisan voters without a candidate on their ballot cannot be taken for granted as a part of a winning coalition for independents in two-way races.

Tensions for independent candidates arise between motivating voters from the party without a candidate to participate in the election and peeling off moderate voters from the party with a candidate in order to build a winning coalition.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Under different circumstances, Jones could have won in a two-way race. However, it is clear that the presence of any Republican on the general election ballot would have certainly ended his chances. Of post-election survey respondents who voted for Jones, 23% responded that they “definitely” would have voted for a Republican had one been on the ballot; 31% responded “probably” and 33% responded “maybe.” Only 5% responded “definitely not.”

The data and takeaways from this race certainly cannot be extrapolated to explain the results of every independent candidacy. But combined with the other findings of this report, the insights from Colorado House District 59 in 2018 suggest that independents in two-way races *can* win, especially if they focus on identifying and turning out those not well-represented by either political party and/or run in a more favorable political environment. While an independent candidate with exceptional name identification or substantial financial resources may have a chance to break through, independent candidates with a similar profile to their opponents and access to comparable resources face seemingly insurmountable challenges in three-way races, absent fundamental changes to how elections are administered.

SECTION II: KEY LEARNINGS

This section of the report shares six key learnings based on the experiences of 2018 independent candidates and the outcomes of their campaigns.

The first three findings present the biggest cultural challenges faced by independent candidates in 2018. The second three learnings note the structural challenges that independent candidates face.

These fundamental key learnings are applied throughout the remainder of the report to suggest what future independent candidates and the organizations supporting them can do to further level the playing field and run competitive campaigns.

Key Learning #1: There is a significant gap between voters' stated desire for a third option and their willingness to actually vote for one.

“[The] desire for a third party does not translate into support for a single third party — instead there is support for multiple, very different parties. And no hypothetical party would be more popular than either the Democrats or Republicans in its policy positions. Likewise, partisans mostly feel well-represented by their parties, and see clear differences between the two parties.”

- Lee Drutman, William Galston and Tod Lindberg³⁷

Maile Foster began her career as a typist and keypunch operator before joining IBM as a secretary at the age of 20. She eventually grew to manage a \$35 million portfolio at Big Blue, left to start her own financial planning business, and served a number of local civic institutions, including the Colorado Springs Rotary Club as president. Foster is a single mother whose son realized the American dream, graduating summa cum laude from Georgia Tech with a master's in mechanical engineering before pursuing a career as a professional racecar driver.

In 2018, Foster ran for Colorado State House as an independent candidate. She out-fundraised her opponents in the first reporting period, received endorsements from the statewide Fraternal Order of Police, a former Colorado Springs mayor and other notable individuals in the area, and ran a credible campaign that reached thousands of voters in a small, compact district.

On election day, she earned 2,489 votes, just 7% of the total votes cast in House District 18.

Reflecting on her campaign, Foster said, “Based on the feedback I got from voters when knocking on doors and other face to face meetings, people believe that the time has come to change our political system. The ballot results, however, did not seem to reflect what people said they were feeling.”

³⁷Lee Drutman, William Galston, and Tod Lindberg, New America, *Spoiler Alert: Why Americans' Desire for a Third Party are Unlikely to Come True* (Sept 2018).

Foster's experience mirrors that of many independent candidates in 2018, as well as long-term trends in American politics: voters increasingly express a desire for an option other than the two major parties, but rarely vote for one even when presented with a credible third option.

A 2017 survey of 2,026 Colorado voters found that 85% of respondents stated that they were open to supporting an independent candidate for state legislature, including 84% of registered Democrats, 82% of Republicans, and 92% of independents. Further, a 2017 Gallup survey found 61% of Americans believe that the two parties are so inadequate at representing the American people that a third major party is needed.³⁸

According to ballot access expert Richard Winger, however, 2018 was the worst performance amongst independent and third party candidates at the top of statewide ballots since 1982.³⁹

What can explain the gap between voters' stated desires and their willingness to vote for a third option? We focus our attention on three macro-phenomena which, though they may apply universally, may not be obvious to casual observers, and may even be out of the control of independent candidates.

SOCIAL DESIRABILITY BIAS

Voters are increasingly discouraged by the vitriolic political discourse and lack of policy achievements that have become the status quo, especially at the national level. Congressional approval ratings are at an all time low.⁴⁰ Americans cite the government and poor leadership as two of the most important problems facing the country.⁴¹ Ethics in government is labeled a "very big problem" by both Republicans and Democrats more often than any other challenge facing the country.⁴²

Given these attitudes, it is not surprising that when voters are asked if they would be open to supporting an independent candidate or if they desire a new political party, they respond "yes." Yet part of the motivation for these "yes" responses may be that survey or focus group participants feel it is socially acceptable to answer in the affirmative, even if it's not how they actually feel.

The Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods defines social desirability bias this way:

"Social desirability is the tendency of some respondents to report an answer in a way they deem to be more socially acceptable than would be their 'true' answer. They do this to project a favorable image of themselves and to avoid receiving negative evaluations. The outcome of the strategy is overreporting of socially desirable behaviors or attitudes and underreporting of socially undesirable behaviors or attitudes."⁴³

³⁸Saad, Lydia. "[Perceived Need for Third Major Party Remains High in U.S.](#)" *Gallup* (Sept 2017).

³⁹Winger, Richard. "[Minor Party and Independent Candidate Vote for Top Offices is Lowest Since 1982](#)". *Ballot Access News* (Nov 2018).

⁴⁰"[Congress and the Public](#)", *Gallup* (Feb 2019).

⁴¹"[Most Important Problem](#)", *Gallup* (Feb 2019).

⁴²Scott, Dylan. "[The biggest political problem in America, explained in one chart](#)", *Vox* (Oct 2018).

⁴³Lavrakas, Paul J. *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., (2008).

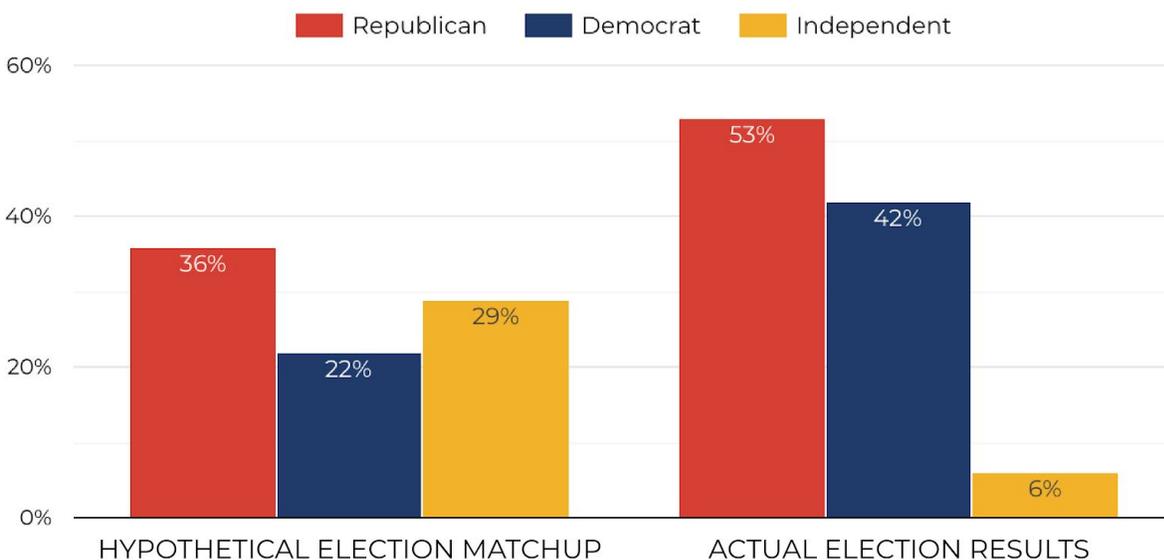
It is clear that there is a problem with our country, and that the two parties may be part of that problem. Thus, answering “yes” — that they support a change in the status quo — would seem desirable. Polling conducted throughout the 2018 election cycle — especially when compared to election day results — suggests social desirability bias may be in play.

Steve Peterson, an international business consultant and long-time Coloradan ran for Senate District 30 in 2018 and branded himself as a “common-sense independent.” He raised \$63,941, a competitive haul compared to his Republican and Democrat opponents who raised \$100,951 and \$13,631 respectively. He knocked over 10,000 doors and had electoral infrastructure in place. Pre-election polling and actual election results, however, demonstrate a gap between voter attitudes towards a generic independent and actual votes cast for Peterson as an independent candidate.

figure 3

Pre-election Polling

CO SENATE DISTRICT 30



Neal Simon has led five businesses, served his local community and state through various civic institutions, and raised three children in Rockville, Maryland. Frustrated by the growing divide in our politics, Simon ran for U.S. Senate in 2018, pledging not to caucus with either party if elected. Neal and his team did a bus tour to all 35 Maryland counties, collected over 10,000 signatures to qualify for the

ballot, participated in a televised debate, raised over a million dollars,⁴⁴ and hosted a fundraiser with the lead singer of *The Fray*, Isaac Slade.⁴⁵

Simon faced a tough challenger in Democrat incumbent Ben Cardin, who has held elected office for longer than Simon had been alive. Their Republican opponent however, ran an incredibly weak campaign, raising only \$200,000,⁴⁶ and rarely attempting to organize volunteers or scale voter contact efforts. Pre-election polling showed Republican voters were significantly more likely to support Simon than Democratic voters. An October 2018 poll found support for Simon at 17%.⁴⁷ On election day, Cardin was re-elected with 65% of the vote, Republican Tony Campbell received 30% support, and Simon earned 4% of votes cast.

The experiences of Steve Peterson and Neal Simon show that voters were far more comfortable expressing support of independent candidates to pollsters than they were with actually voting for a credible independent option on their ballots.

HEURISTICS ARE POWERFUL, ESPECIALLY DOWN-BALLOT

“Party cues are useful in local, state and national politics. These cues apply to most issues, since the parties typically take diverging positions on the issues of the day. In a very real sense, partisanship is a superheuristic in orienting people to politics.”

- Russell Dalton, *The Apartisan American*⁴⁸

Generally, voters know what Republican and Democratic candidates stand for. While candidates may each have their own policy priorities and ideas, party identities are useful to voters insofar as they indicate the basic orientation of the candidate on the political spectrum. In short, the words “Republican” or “Democrat” serve as a valuable cues to voters.

In Congress, liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats are all but extinct. Figure 3 shows the sorting of Congress over the last four decades. This sorting of party identification along ideological grounds has also occurred amongst the electorate, as Figure 5 shows.

⁴⁴ “[Maryland Senate Race 2018](#)”. *Open Secrets* (2018).

⁴⁵ Polus, Sarah. “[The Fray’s Isaac Slade plays first solo show at rally for Md. Senate candidate Neal Simon](#)” *Washington Post* (Sept 2018).

⁴⁶ “[Maryland Senate Race 2018](#)”, *Open Secrets* (2018).

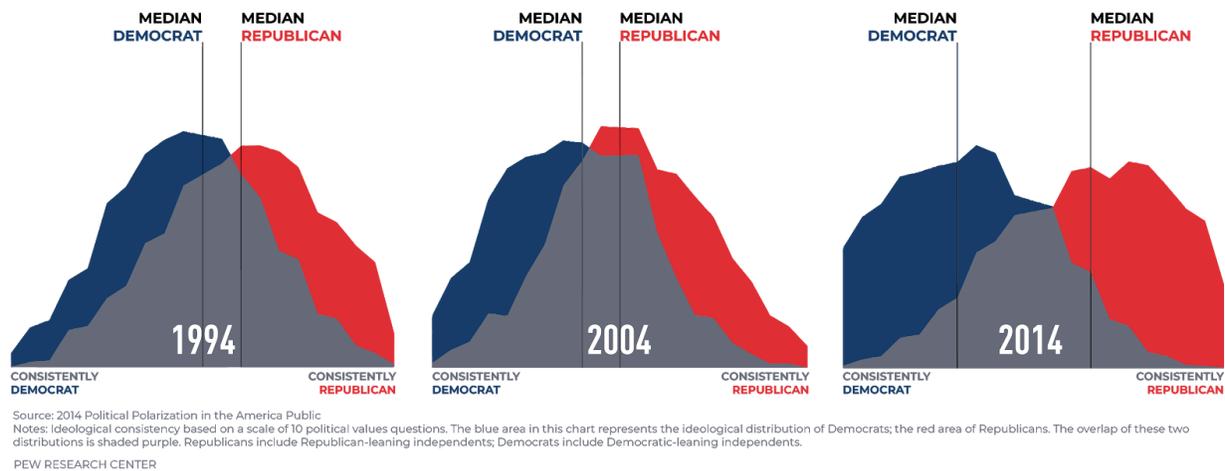
⁴⁷ Griffiths, Shawn. “[NEW POLL: Independent Neal Simon Up 10 Points in Maryland Senate Race](#)”, *IVN* (Oct 2018).

⁴⁸ Dalton, Russel. *The Apartisan American: Dealignment and the Transformation of Electoral Politics* (2012). pp 55.

figure 5

Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past

1994 - 2014



To compete, independent candidates — without a well-defined identity cue of their own — must spend an incredible amount of money and energy to define for voters their place on the political spectrum. On top of not having a party cue, independents also face difficulties overcoming the bias that non-partisans often lose, a sentiment many voters have consistently cited as a reason they were unwilling to support an independent candidate.

The challenges for independent candidates running in state legislature races, and other down ballot races, are especially acute, as voters often lack basic information about these races. A 2013 study found that fewer than 20% of voters can identify their state legislator.⁴⁹ Only 1% of *local* news is about statehouse politics.⁵⁰ Voters are much more likely to cast a vote for their state lawmaker based on their attitudes towards the president rather than their approval of the job the state legislature.⁵¹ This data suggest that a significant part of the electorate lacks the time or interest in exploring alternatives to the Democratic or Republican candidates, especially in down ballot contests.

⁴⁹ Stein, Jeff. “[This study shows American federalism is a total joke](#)”, *Vox* (Sept 2016).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Even if voters’ policy preferences and values align with an independent candidate, voters may still not cast a ballot for them if (i) the independent candidate has not invested the resources or energy to share his/her message; (ii) the voter has not taken the time to research and remains unaware of the independent candidate; (iii) the voter has lost interest in considering each ballot line, instead opting to vote for their generally preferred party; (iv) the voter has taken the time to research the independent candidate, but came to the conclusion (perhaps based on local reporting or lack thereof) that the candidate has no chance to win.

Four post-election polls demonstrate how many voters self-reported voting for only one political party. These figures may be underrepresented from national trends because (i) polling was not done in states with straight party voting; and (ii) social desirability bias may cause survey respondents to overreport the extent to which they consider voting for candidates from different parties.

table 7

BIOGRAPHY AND POLICY

“ON YOUR BALLOT, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE HOW YOU VOTED?”

| Response | AZ LD-21 ⁵² | CO HD-59 ⁵³ | Pueblo, CO ⁵⁴ | NH Statewide ⁵⁵ |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| I voted for all Republicans | 25% | 16% | 8% | 33% |
| I voted for all Democrats | 18% | 17% | 33% | 33% |
| I voted for mostly Republicans | 20% | 25% | 15% | 12% |
| I voted for mostly Democrats | 22% | 27% | 23% | 14% |
| I voted for about an equal number of Democrats and Republicans | 14% | 8% | 17% | 7% |
| Not Sure / Don't Know | 2% | 6% | 4% | 1% |

⁵² Unite America. “Arizona Senate District 21 Post Election Survey” *Triton Polling and Research* (2018). Poll conducted amongst 415 AZ LD 21 voters from 11/15-11/21/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.8%.

⁵³ Unite America. “Colorado House District 59 Post Election Survey”, *Triton Polling & Research* (2018). Poll conducted amongst 400 CO HD 59 voters from 11/9-11/18/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.9%.

⁵⁴ Unite America. “Pueblo, Colorado - Ranked Choice Voting Survey”, *Triton Polling & Research* (2018). Poll conducted amongst 401 Pueblo voters from 12/12-12/18/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.9%.

⁵⁵ Unite America. “New Hampshire 2020 Election Survey”, *Triton Polling and Research* (2018). Poll of 901 registered voters in NH conducted 12/04-12/05/18 with a margin of error of +/- 3.3%.

INTENSITY OF AGREEMENT MATTERS

“Those who identify with a social group are more likely to take action to defend it. When a group’s status is threatened, a strongly identified group member will fight to maintain the status quo of the group. This group member’s individual sense of esteem is tied to the group’s status, and therefore any reduction in that status would be painful to experience. In other words, when a party might lose, a strongly identified partisan will take action to defend the group.”

- Dr. Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement*⁵⁶

There is a significant difference between *agreeing* with a statement asked in a poll (e.g. “I am open to supporting an independent” or “I think we need a third political party to bridge the divide”) and *taking action* (e.g. casting a vote, donating money, volunteering time) to turn those desires into reality. This cognitive dissonance represents a major challenge for independents; without supporters of the same intensity and passion of the two parties, independent candidates will continue to struggle to mount build sustainable coalitions of supporters through credible, high capacity campaigns.

A 2018 report commissioned by More in Common and authored by leading researchers Stephen Hawkins, Daniel Yudkin, Miriam Juan-Torres, and Tim Dixon paints a portrait of the American electorate divided not only between Republicans and Democrats, but also between hyper-tribal voters and an “exhausted majority” constituency that is more moderate and less politically engaged. In the summary of their “Hidden Tribes” report, the authors write:

“At the root of America’s polarization are divergent sets of values and worldviews, or ‘core beliefs.’ These core beliefs shape the ways that individuals interpret the world around them at the most fundamental level. Our study shows how political opinions stem from these deeply held core beliefs. This study examines five dimensions of individuals’ core beliefs:

- Tribalism and group identification
- Fear and perception of threat
- Parenting style and authoritarian disposition
- Moral foundations
- Personal agency and responsibility

The study finds that this hidden architecture of beliefs, worldview, and group attachments can predict an individual’s views on social and political issues with greater accuracy than demographic factors like race, gender, or income.

The research undertaken for this report identifies seven segments of Americans (or “tribes”) who are distinguished by differences in their underlying beliefs and attitudes. Membership in these tribes was determined by each individual’s answers to a subset of 58 core belief and behavioral questions that were asked together with the rest of the survey. None of the questions used to create the segmentation related to current political issues or demographic indicators such as race, gender, age or income, yet the responses that each segment gives to questions on current political issues are remarkably predictable and show a very clear pattern.”⁵⁷

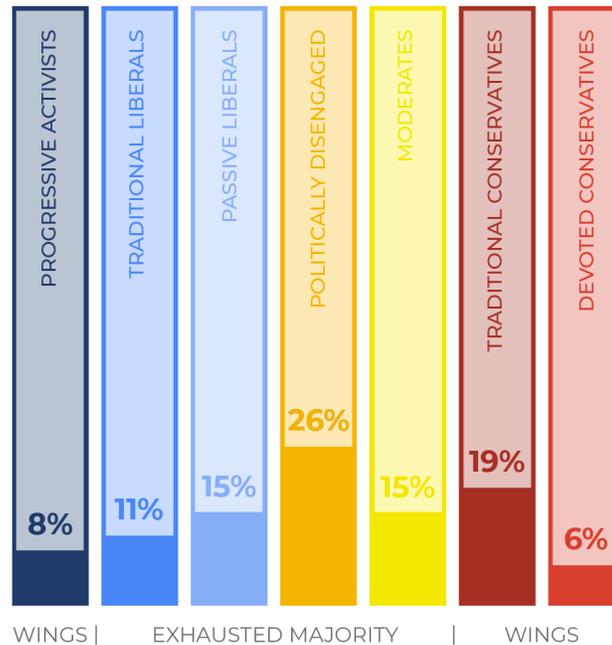
⁵⁶ Mason, Lilliana. *Uncivil Agreement: How politics became our identity* (2018). pp. 23.

⁵⁷ Hidden Tribes, “[The Exhausted Majority](#)” *The Hidden Tribes of America* (Oct 2018).

figure 6

HIDDEN TRIBES

WHAT'S YOUR TRIBE?



Of the seven segments of Americans the report identifies, three (Progressive Activists, Traditional Conservatives, and Devoted Conservatives) collectively represent the “wings” of the American political and civic life. The authors argue that these wings are:

- **More unified on the most contentious issues**, such as race, guns, and LGBTQ rights, and are significantly less likely to change, or even compromise on, specific policy issues.
- **More likely to fear opposing sides** of political debates and campaigns. They are also likely to be the partisan constituency distrusted most by moderates in the other party.
- **More likely to consume polarizing media content** which generates profits for social media enterprises and traditional media companies.
- And, critically, **are dominating our national political conversation**, despite only consisting of one-third of the population.

In his 2013 book, *The Apartisan American*, author Richard Dalton compares how independent voters and partisans engage in the political process. Reviewing data from the 2000-2008 American National Election

Surveys, Dalton finds that partisans are more likely than independents to participate in elections, protests, internet activism, and other forms of political activity.⁵⁸

A final challenge for independent candidates is that key campaign activities — including fundraising and volunteer recruitment — are sometimes functions that the two major parties and other formal institutions coordinate on behalf of partisan candidacies. Often, party volunteers knock doors for “slates” of candidates, while professional fundraisers host events for multiple candidates at once. In addition to creating economies of scale, these activities reinforce the “team” aspects of modern campaigning. In this way, the nature of major political party organizations can often cultivate a stronger social group identity than independent candidacies.

⁵⁸ Dalton, Russel. *The Apartisan American: Dealignment and the Transformation of Electoral Politics*, (2012). pp. 65 - 82.

Key Learning #2: The “independent” brand does not deliver votes for independent candidates

Independent candidates who gain ballot access but do not run competitive campaigns (i.e. raise as much money, knock as many doors, attract as much media attention) often receive 1- 4% of the vote. Third party or independent candidates at the top of the ballot in their state averaged 2.8% support in 2018.⁵⁹ Competitive campaign activity is critical to making voters, pollsters, and the press believe an independent candidate is a credible option; however, even the most well-organized independent campaigns in three-way races against major party candidates rarely generate beyond 10-15% of the vote.⁶⁰

This suggests that the brand “independent” may only on its own generate one or two points of support from voters. Beyond that, each additional vote must be *earned* by either convincing someone who would otherwise not participate in the election to do so, or by convincing a voter who otherwise would support a major party nominee to break with their normal voting behavior.

In 2018, for example, Maine State Treasurer and former State Representative Terry Hayes ran for Governor. Hayes’ campaign collected over 7,000 signatures, became the only the second independent gubernatorial campaign in state history to qualify for the Clean Elections Program (collecting nearly 8,000 contributions from Mainers ranging from \$5-\$100), earned the endorsement of dozens of former state legislators, and had over 100 people across the state write letters to the editor supporting her candidacy. On Election Day in a state with a history of electing independents to statewide office, Hayes received just 6% of the vote.

The Gubernatorial race in Kansas presents a similar story. Businessman Greg Orman had previously ran for U.S. Senate in 2014, earning 43% of the vote in a heads-up race against incumbent Republican Pat Roberts. In 2018, Orman’s opponents included Democratic State Senator Laura Kelly and Republican Secretary of State Kris Kobach. Orman entered the race with more name recognition (44%) than Kelly (26%) and eventually matched Kobach’s 79%, according to a May 2018 poll.⁶¹ Despite a well-funded campaign, detailed policy agenda, and strong base of volunteer support, Orman was unable to break through and received just 7% of the vote.

One 2018 contest in Arizona helps demonstrate why the lack of built in support for independent candidates presents a challenge for candidates in two-way races, too. Kathy Knecht, a former public school teacher, nonprofit executive, and school board member who served as a political independent for 12 years, ran for state senate in Arizona’s 21st Legislative District.

A post-election survey asked voters why they chose to support Knecht or her Republican opponent, Rick Gray, who won by just 4% in a race where 78,249 votes were cast. Open-ended responses were coded into

⁵⁹ Winger, Richard. “[Minor Party and Independent Candidate Vote for Top Offices is Lowest Since 1982](#)”. *Ballot Access News* (Nov 2018).

⁶⁰ Unite America. “Election Night Tracker”, *2018 Independent Candidates Election Night Tracker* (Nov 2018).

⁶¹ Unite America. “Grow Kansas Poll” *Tulchin Research* (July 2018).
Poll conducted from 7/5-7/11/18 with 400 respondents.

categories which demonstrate the lack of a “base” of support for independent candidates. Only 14 of the 104 respondents who reported voting for Knecht said they did so because she was an independent, including her ability to break through partisan gridlock and fight special interests; more respondents (23) reported voting for her simply because she was not a Republican. Meanwhile, over two thirds Gray’s supporters reported voting for him because they traditionally supported Republican candidates. See tables 8 and 9.

This data suggest voters are much more motivated to vote for a party candidate simply because of their partisan identification than they are willing to vote for an independent candidate who rejects party politics. In short, "independent" does not help candidates generate votes in the way that partisan labels do.

table 8

ARIZONA LD-21

“WHY DID YOU SUPPORT KATHY KNECHT?”

| <i>(Asked only of survey respondents who reported voting for Independent Kathy Knecht)</i> | | |
|--|------------------|---|
| Broad Category | # of Respondents | Illustrative Examples |
| I like Kathy's story or policy positions | 55 | "She is honest" "She has good training and was prepared to run" "I believe she was honest and aligned with my ideas" |
| Kathy is not a Republican | 23 | "She was not Republican" "Not a Republican" "Against Republicans" |
| I do not like Rick Gray | 7 | "Rick Gray is bought and sold by the special interests" "Rick Gray has been there too long" "Not Rick Gray!" |
| I think she can break through the system as an independent | 14 | "Thought it was time for change" "Because she is an independent, a vote against both sides" "She was an independent" |
| I am a liberal who supports Democrats | 5 | "No democratic candidate" "There wasn't a Democrat and I wasn't going to vote Republican" "There was no democrat and I liked her views" |
| Total | 104 | |

table 9

ARIZONA LD-21

“WHY DID YOU SUPPORT REPUBLICAN RICK GRAY?”

| <i>(Asked only of survey respondents who reported voting for Republican Rick Gray)</i> | | |
|--|------------------|---|
| Broad Category | # of Respondents | Illustrative Examples |
| I'm a conservative who supports Republicans | 105 | "He is a Republican" "Republican and that's a leg up" "I vote straight Republican" "Voted political lines" |
| I like Rick's story or policy positions | 37 | "He was most closely aligned with same positions" "He has done a good job past" "His beliefs are in line with mine" |
| I can't vote for Democrats | 2 | "Don't want a Democrat" "He is not a Democrat" |
| Did not like Kathy | 2 | "Liked him better then Kathy" "Did not want to vote for the other person" |
| Total | 146 | |

Key Learning #3: Independent voters are not a cohesive voting base for independent candidates. Those not represented by either party provide a starting point.

Polling before and after election day demonstrates how independent voters are not a reliable base of support for independent candidates. Independent voters may be independent for many different reasons; few ever report registering as such because they have a particular affinity towards independent candidates.

This lack of support for independent candidates amongst independent voters might be best explained by looking at a slightly different population: voters who desire a third major political party in American politics.

A 2018 report commissioned by The Democracy Fund Voter Study Group and authored by Lee Drutman, William A. Galston, and Tod Lindberg identified the level of support for a third party, as well as what third-party advocates believe the party should stand for. The key findings of the report “[Spoiler Alert: Why Americans' Desires for a Third Party Are Unlikely to Come True](#)” are summarized by the authors this way:

- **TWO-THIRDS OF AMERICANS WANT A THIRD PARTY.** Sixty-eight percent of Americans say that two parties do not do an adequate job of representing the American people and that a third party is needed.
- **BUT THIRD-PARTY ENTHUSIASTS DON'T AGREE ON WHAT THAT THIRD PARTY SHOULD BE.** About one-third want a party of the center, about one-fifth want a party to the left of the Democrats, and about one-fifth want a party to the right of the Republicans, with the remainder wanting something else. It would take at least five parties to capture the ideological aspirations of Americans.
- **PARTISANS ARE NOT ABOUT TO ABANDON THEIR PARTY; MOST VALUE WHAT MAKES THEIR PARTY DISTINCT FROM THE OTHER MAJOR PARTY.** Seventy-seven percent of Americans feel better represented by one party or the other, leaving only 23 percent who are equivocal between the two existing parties. And overwhelming majorities of partisans feel well-represented by their parties (81 percent of Democrats and 75 percent of Republicans) and very poorly represented by the other major party (68 percent of Democrats and 71 percent of Republicans).⁶²

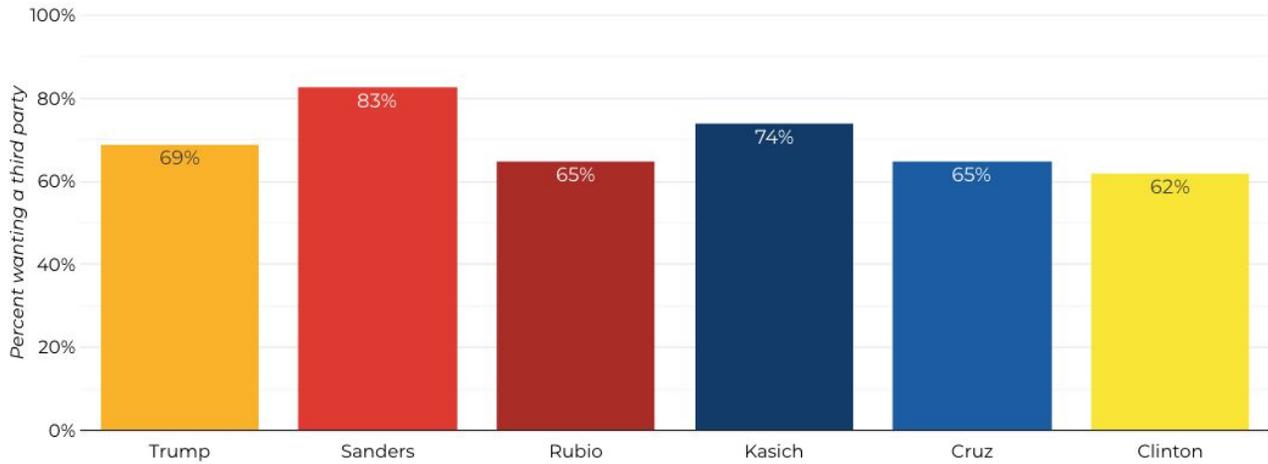
Among other insights, the charts below demonstrate (i) the support for a third party comes from a wide range of ideologically inclined voters, and (ii) consensus on where a hypothetical third party should orient itself on the political spectrum does not exist.

⁶² Drutman, Lee, Galston, William and Lindberg, Tod, *New America*, “[Spoiler Alert: Why Americans' Desire for a Third Party are Unlikely to Come True](#)” (Sept 2018).

Figure 7

Support for a Third Party

(BY 2016 PRIMARY VOTE)

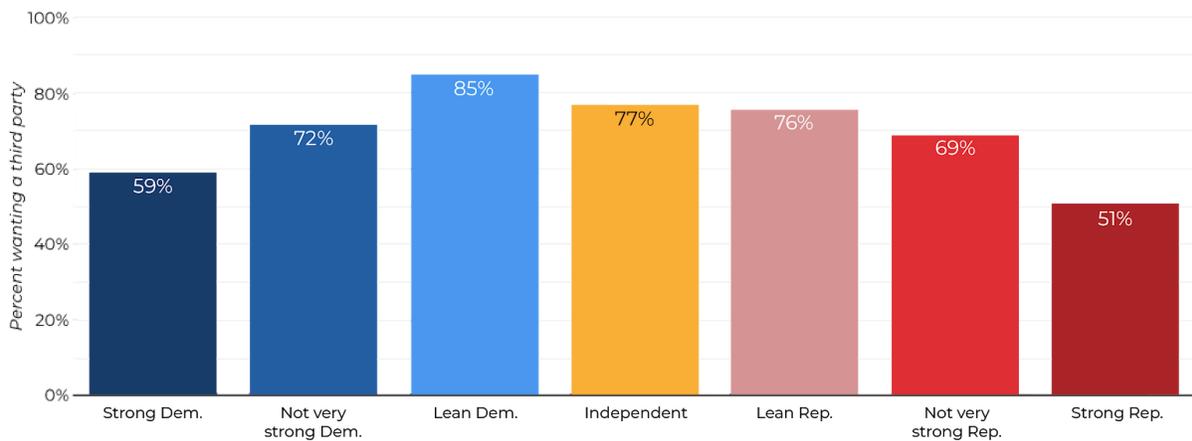


SOURCE: SPOILER ALERT: WHY AMERICANS' DESIRES FOR A THIRD PARTY ARE UNLIKELY TO COME TRUE

figure 8

Support for a Third Party

(BY PARTISAN AFFILIATION)



SOURCE: SPOILER ALERT: WHY AMERICANS' DESIRES FOR A THIRD PARTY ARE UNLIKELY TO COME TRUE

If the base of support for independent candidates does not come from independent voters, where might it come from? The Paul Jones case study (page 11) found that voters who reported not being well represented by either political party were more likely than independent voters to support the independent candidate. While this population is likely not as reliable of a base for independent candidates as partisan voters are to party candidates, it does provide a coalition from which to build, especially in two-way races. This share of the American electorate deserves a representative voice in our political system and may be a critical constituency for future independent candidates, moderates running in party primaries, and ballot measure campaigns seeking to pass political reforms.

Key Learning #4: Two-way races are exponentially more favorable for independent candidates than three-way races.

Of the 14 independent candidates who won state or federal elections in 2018, 13 did so in two-way races. Only a sitting incumbent, U.S. Senator Angus King (I-ME), won a three-way race. As Key Learning #6 suggests (see page 43), independents can win three-way races, especially with well-established name recognition and brand identity on par with the major parties or their nominees. However, as a general rule, independent candidates face much more favorable conditions in two-way contests. **Of the hundreds of independent candidates who ran for state legislature and only faced a challenger from one political party, 12 won.**⁶³ Of those who ran for state legislature in three-way races under traditional first-past the post systems, zero won.

Two state legislative races in Alaska provide for interesting comparison:

Representative Dan Ortiz (I-AK) was re-elected in 2018 with 60% support against one Republican challenger in a PVI R+9 district that President Trump won by 15%.⁶⁴ Ortiz ran on a record of bipartisanship, having served a key role in forming a bipartisan majority coalition following his 2016 election, as well as having worked with the Governor on a long-term solution to the state's fiscal crisis. A Southeast Alaskan for over 60 years, Ortiz's clear policy priorities included expanding the fishing industry, protecting native populations, and investing in educational opportunities for the next generation.

One of Representative Ortiz's independent colleagues, Representative Jason Grenn also faced re-election in a district with a nearly identical profile, including a matching PVI score (R+9), and a 15% margin of victory for President Trump. After winning his 2016 election by less than 200 votes against a single Republican opponent, 2018 was sure to be a tight race, again against a single Republican opponent, Sara Rasmussen.

Just days before the Democratic Party primary filing deadline, a municipal maintenance worker, Dustin Darden, tossed his name in the ring. Darden was the only Democratic candidate who did not earn the support of his state party.⁶⁵ Darden, however, earned 12% support, or 860 votes. Grenn lost to the Republican nominee by 447 votes.

The nearly twenty-point gap between Grenn's performance (41%) and Ortiz's (60%) demonstrates the challenges faced by independent candidates in three-way races. Without a base of support of their own, independent candidates in two-way races can rely on voters from the unrepresented party to deliver a reliable starting coalition from which to build.

Other independents who won two-way races for state house in 2018 include incumbent Representative Kent Ackley (ME), incumbent Representative Norman Higgins (ME), Walter Riseman (ME), Jeff

⁶³ Ballotpedia data provided to Unite America.

⁶⁴ "[Daily Kos Elections Statewide Results by CD](#)", *Daily Kos* (Nov 2018).

⁶⁵ Downing, Suzanne. "[Democrat mystified: His party left him off the list of candidates](#)". *Must Read Alaska* (Aug 2018).

Evangelos (ME), Bill Pluecker (ME), Barbara Murphy (VT), Terry Norris (VT) and Jim Roscoe (WY). In North Dakota, incumbent Al Jaeger left his party and was re-elected Secretary of State as an independent.

While two-way races certainly provide independent candidates more political opportunity, challenges remain. First, two-way races are often uncontested by one of the two major parties because of either artificial sorting (e.g., gerrymandering) or natural sorting (e.g., along economic and demographic lines⁶⁶). Second, data shows a significant share of voters from the party without a candidate are likely to skip the election on their ballot. A post election poll in AZ LD-21 found that among those who recalled how they voted, 15% of Democrats reported not voting in their state senate election in the absence of a Democrat on the ballot.⁶⁷ Similarly, a post election poll in CO HD-59 found 20% of Republicans who recalled their choice said they skipped voting in their state senate election in the absence of a Republican on the ballot.⁶⁸

table 10

NOTABLE TWO-WAY LOSSES

| District | Independent Candidate | | Opponent (* Incumbent) | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|-----|------------------------|-----|
| ME HD 47 | Dennis Welsh | 49% | Janice Cooper (D)* | 51% |
| AZ LD 21 | Kathy Knecht | 48% | Rick Gray (R)* | 52% |
| CA Insurance Commissioner | Steve Poizner | 47% | Ricardo Lara (D) | 53% |
| ME HD 59 | Owen Casas* | 47% | Victoria Doudera (D) | 53% |
| ME HD 67 | Anne Gass | 47% | Susan Austin (R) | 53% |
| CO HD 59 | Paul Jones | 44% | Barbara McLachlan (D)* | 56% |
| AK At Large CD | Alyse Gavin | 46% | Don Young (R)* | 54% |
| AK HD 33 | Chris Dimond | 44% | Sara Hannan (D) | 56% |
| WA LD 12 | Dr. Ann Diamond | 42% | Keith Goehner (R) | 58% |
| NM HD 50 | Jarratt Applewhite | 41% | Matthew McQueen (D)* | 59% |
| CO HD 54 | Thea Chase | 34% | Matt Soper (R) | 66% |
| AK HD 29 | Shawn Butler | 29% | Ben Carpenter (R) | 71% |

⁶⁶ For a full thesis on this point, reference: Bishop, Bill. *The Big Sort* (May 2008).

⁶⁷ Unite America. “Arizona Senate District 21 Post Election Survey” *Triton Polling and Research* (2018).
Poll conducted amongst 415 AZ LD 21 voters from 11/15-11/21/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.8%.

⁶⁸ Unite America. “Colorado House District 21 Post Election Survey” *Triton Polling & Research* (2018).
Poll conducted amongst 400 CO HD 59 voters from 11/9-11/18/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.9%.

Key Learning #5: Favorable electoral rules may help, but are not silver bullets.

There is broad consensus in the academic literature that the United States' use of first past the post electoral systems disadvantage independents; Duverger's Law holds that double ballot or proportional representation systems favor multipartism, while first past the post (or plurality rule) systems tend to favor a two-party system.⁶⁹ This consensus suggests a transition to Ranked Choice Voting, Top-Two Primaries, or Top-Four primaries might open lanes for independent third party candidates to compete with the two major parties.

Further, the places where independents have performed best include states like Alaska, Vermont, and Maine where legislative districts tend to be smaller. This section offers an explanatory thesis for why that may be.

RANKED CHOICE VOTING

Election reform advocates and independent candidate supporters were excited to see how the implementation of Ranked Choice Voting would change voter attitudes towards independent candidates' role as "spoilers" in elections.

Ranked Choice Voting is an alternative voting method that allows voters to rank their choices in order of preference. If no candidate receives 50% of first place votes, the last place candidate is eliminated, and their supporters' second place votes are counted, a process that continues until a winner emerges with majority support.

Proponents of Ranked Choice Voting argue the system gives voters more choice, voice, and power in the political system. The system permits voters to vote their conscience and support the candidate they like most without fear of wasting their vote, and inadvertently helping to elect the candidate they like least. Studies have also shown Ranked Choice Voting diminishes the role of negative campaigning as candidates seek to secure second place votes.⁷⁰

The system has been implemented and/or approved by in 18 cities across the United States, including San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Oakland.⁷¹ In addition, federal elections in Australia, Ireland, and New Zealand are administered with Ranked Choice Voting.⁷²

In 2018, Maine became the first state to adopt Ranked Choice Voting for use in federal elections. The system's impact on independent candidates was immediately tested as voters in Maine's 1st Congressional District had the opportunity to elect a well-funded, centrist independent, Martin Grohman,

⁶⁹ Mann, Thomas and Ornstein, Norman. *It's Even Worse Than It Looks Was: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (2016).

⁷⁰ "[Campaign Civility: Ranked Choice Voting and Civil Campaigning](#)" *FairVote* (Accessed March 2019).

⁷¹ "[Ranked Choice Voting/Instant Runoff](#)", *Fair Vote* (Accessed March 2019).

⁷² *Ibid.*

who had served two terms in the state legislature. While most voters reported enjoying the Ranked Choice Voting experience, only a few said that the new system alleviated their fear of “wasting” their vote and allowed them to vote for an independent. While Grohman performed marginally better than other independent candidates for U.S. House, receiving 8% of the vote, other critical challenges for independents previously identified proved larger, insurmountable hurdles.

As the case study on page 45 shows, the vast majority of voters identified loyalty to one of the two major parties, their respective nominees, or unfamiliarity with Grohman’s biography and/or policy priorities as motivations for not voting for Grohman. In other words, other key challenges (i.e. a lack of a base and an unclear identity) remained.

MULTI-MEMBER DISTRICTS

In 2016 independent Ben Jickling was elected to represent his hometown in the Vermont state legislature with 30% of the vote in a four-way contest in a multi-member district. He was re-elected in 2018 with 25% in a five-way contest.

table 11

VERMONT ORANGE-WASHINGTON-ADDISON DISTRICT

| 2018 Election | | | 2016 Election | | |
|---------------------|-------------|-------|-------------------|-------------|-------|
| Candidate | Total Votes | % | Candidate | Total Votes | % |
| Jay Hooper (D)* | 2,222 | 33.5% | Ben Jickling (I) | 2,064 | 29.6% |
| Ben Jickling (I)* | 1,655 | 24.9% | Jay Hooper (D) | 1,854 | 26.6% |
| Larry Satcowitz (D) | 1,056 | 15.9% | Patsy French (D)* | 1,656 | 23.7% |
| Stephen Webster | 967 | 14.6% | Bob Orleck (R) | 1,405 | 20.1% |
| Daniel Brown | 734 | 11.1% | | | |

In Vermont, 46 out of 150 state representatives and 10 out of 30 state senators are elected in multi-member districts. Some elections for state house in Maryland, South Dakota, North Dakota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, South Dakota also use some form of multi-member districts.

TOP-TWO AND TOP-FOUR PRIMARIES

Top-two primaries, theoretically, could also level the playing field for independents. Instead of choosing a primary to participate in, voters in Washington, California, and Louisiana⁷³ cast a single vote in blanket primaries in which all candidates participate, including independents. Similar to multi-member districts, such systems lower the vote threshold necessary for independents to advance to the general election in an eventual two-way race.

In 2018, former Republican California Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner nearly became the first independent ever elected to statewide office in California. He won 47% of the vote, just six percentage points behind his Democratic competitor in the general election. Running in a different election year — namely one not marked by a surge in Democratic support — its possible to see how a candidate like Poizner could break through in a two-way race made possible by “top-two” primaries.

table 12

CALIFORNIA INSURANCE COMMISSIONER ELECTION

| June 5 2018 Top Two Primary ⁷⁴ | | | November 6, 2018 General Election ⁷⁵ | | |
|---|------------------|--------------|---|------------------|--------------|
| Candidate | Total Votes | % | Candidate | Total Votes | % |
| Ricardo Lara (D) | 2,538,478 | 41% | Ricardo Lara (D) | 6,186,039 | 52.9% |
| Steve Poizner (I)* | 2,569,254 | 40.5% | Steve Poizner (I)* | 5,515,293 | 47.1% |
| Asif Mahmood (D) | 846,023 | 13.5% | N/A | | |
| Nathalie Hrizi (PF) | 316,149 | 5% | N/A | | |

SMALL DISTRICTS

Finally, independent candidates have traditionally performed better in smaller districts. Given that independent candidates face unique challenges finding built-in base of support and defining their political identity, this makes sense: in smaller districts, it is easier to contact a larger proportion of voters

⁷³ Louisiana candidates run in a “jungle” primary, and unlike in Washington and California, if any candidate received 50%+1 support in the primary election, no general election is held and the individual is declared the winner.

⁷⁴ “[Statement of Vote - June 5, 2018, Primary Election](#)”, *California Secretary of State* (Nov 2018).

⁷⁵ “[Statement of Vote - November 6, 2018, General Election](#)”, *California Secretary of State* (Nov 2018).

(especially when the district is compact and candidates can more easily knock every door) and it is more likely voters will personally know the candidates. Thus, the largest hurdles independents face are easier to overcome in smaller districts.

Walter Riseman, who was elected to his first term in Maine's 67th House District, provides a good example. A resident of his district for the last four decades, Riseman was a successful small business owner before serving as CFO of a local nonprofit which provides counseling and services to empower low-income families to secure housing, public benefits, and access to economic development opportunities. Well-known and facing only one opponent in a district spanning just a few hundred square miles, Riseman won with 2,420 votes (55%).

For perspective, the 12 independent candidates elected to state houses in 2018 will represent a total of 125,452 constituents in just 50,351 households, combined;⁷⁶ by comparison the average state house district in California contains 483,177 constituents.⁷⁷

FAVORABLE CONDITIONS ARE NOT SILVER BULLETS

As this section has demonstrated, favorable electoral rules can help level the playing field for independent candidates, though of course even the most favorable conditions will not guarantee victories. Examples exist of independents still coming up short under each of these electoral reforms: a former majority leader and a five-term incumbent, Paul Poirier (I-VT), lost his reelection by 222 votes in a four-way contest in a multi-member district; in Washington, independent Dr. Ann Diamond won her top-two primary over two Democrats in a reliably red district, only to lose her bid for state house to a conservative county commissioner; and Maine independent incumbent Owen Casas lost his re-election by 5% in a district where only 5,629 votes were cast. Favorable electoral rules can make electing independent candidates easier, **however they are not silver bullets.**

⁷⁶ "Overview of House District 36, Alaska", *Statistical Atlas* (Sept 2018).; "Overview of House District 69, Maine", *Statistical Atlas* (Sept 2018).; "Overview of House District 127, Vermont", *Statistical Atlas* (Sept 2018).; "Overview of House District 128, Vermont", *Statistical Atlas* (Sept 2018).; "Overview of House District 82, Maine", *Statistical Atlas* (Sept 2018).; "Overview of House District 91, Maine", *Statistical Atlas* (Sept 2018).; "Overview of House District 95, Maine", *Statistical Atlas* (Sept 2018).; "Overview of House District 120, Maine", *Statistical Atlas* (Sept 2018).; "Overview of House District Franklin 2nd, Massachusetts", *Statistical Atlas* (Sept 2018).; "Overview of House District Franklin 2, Vermont", *Statistical Atlas* (Sept 2018).; "Overview of House District Addison Rutland, Vermont", *Statistical Atlas* (Sept 2018).; "Overview of House District 22, Wyoming", *Statistical Atlas* (Sept 2018).

⁷⁷ "[Overview of Assembly District 22, California](#)", *Statistical Atlas* (Sept 2018).

Key Learning #6: Strong independent candidates with favorable political dynamics can take advantage of unique electoral opportunities.

While 2018 election results show independent candidates fare significantly better in two-way races, independents can and have won three-way races. A combination of strong name recognition, brand identity, and unique sets of political circumstances can give independents a competitive shot.

ANGUS KING was first elected to statewide office as an independent when he won a three-way Governor's race by 7,878 votes with 35% of the vote in 1994; a Green Party candidate received 6% of the vote, perhaps siphoning just enough support from the two major party nominees to narrowly elect King. Prior to running for office, King was a public television host and successful businessman.

King then won re-election in 1998 with 59% of the vote in a three-way race. In 2012, King ran for U.S. Senate, earning an impressive 53% of the vote against Democrat Cynthia Dill and Republican Charlie Summers; in 2018, he was re-elected with a 20% margin of victory in another three-way race.

Personally wealthy and well-known from his time as Governor, King was able to build name recognition and a brand at least as well known as the Democratic and Republican brands in the state. These factors, a strong executive and legislative record, and the advantages associated with incumbency, King has achieved a level of statewide independent electoral success that's unprecedented in American history.

JESSE VENTURA was elected Governor of Minnesota as the Reform Party's nominee in 1998; he won with 37% of the vote, narrowly beating Republican nominee Norm Coleman by a margin of 3.7% (56,363 votes). Prior to running for office, Ventura had served in the U.S. Navy, competed on the professional wrestling circuit, acted in several feature films, and served as mayor of Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. Ventura reformed the state's property tax system, implemented the first sales tax rebate, saw ground break on a new line of Minnesota's light rail system, and cut income taxes before deciding to run for reelection in 2002.

A unique set of circumstances forced incumbent U.S. Senator **LISA MURKOWSKI** to run as a political independent during her 2010 reelection campaign. First appointed to represent Alaska as a Republican by her father, the sitting Governor, in 2002, Murkowski was re-elected in 2004. In 2010, though, she faced a primary challenge from Joe Miller who, with the support of Governor Sarah Palin, won the primary by just 2%. Urged by emails, phone calls and social media posts from supporters, Murkowski's advisors considered an insurgent campaign as either a libertarian or independent candidate. After a coin flip turned up 'heads', Murkowski announced she would continue her campaign as an independent write-in candidate.⁷⁸ Benefiting from strong name recognition, broad public support for her moderate agenda, and the strong financial and public support of key interest groups, Murkowski won by less than 11,000 votes on election day, narrowly beating out Miller and the Democratic nominee Scott McAdams.

⁷⁸ Murkowski officially remained registered as a Republican

Notably, in each of these cases, independents finding success in three-way races had as much name recognition and brand identity as the candidates from the two major political parties. The winning candidates described above were well known: because of time spent on television, because of personal wealth, and/or because of long-time service to their states. Thus, while two-way races provide exponentially better circumstances for independents, three-way races can be won when these conditions exist.

A final three-way race from 2018 shows where an independent came up just short. Governor **BILL WALKER** (I-AK) ran for reelection against former state Sen. Mike Dunleavy (R) and former U.S. Senator Mark Begich (D). Governor Walker's campaign emphasized the tough choices Walker had made in the long-term interest of the state, including cutting the size of the state's permanent fund dividend paid out to Alaskans each year. Walker earned endorsements from major labor unions, leaders from all political parties, and the states' major periodicals. Pre-election polling consistently showed Walker trailing Dunleavy, with Begich in third, leading many liberal and independent-minded voters to call on Begich to drop out of the race.

An August 2018 poll found Dunleavy at 36%, Walker at 26%, and Begich at 24% with 12% undecided. The same poll found that 69% of Begich supporters would have broken for Walker in a two-way race, while only 18% would have broken for Dunleavy.

On September 4th, the last day Begich could have removed his name from the ballot, he told supporters at his campaign headquarters: "It's a three-way race, so get used to it." Governor Walker, seeking to protect his policy legacy of Medicaid expansion, criminal justice reform, and a balanced budget, eventually dropped out of the race a few weeks later. In his withdrawal speech he said:

"'Alaska First' is, and cannot only be, a campaign slogan. When I said I ran for governor to do the job, not make the decisions to keep the job, I meant exactly what I said. Every decision I have made as your governor, I have made on the basis of what I believe is best for Alaska..."

Alaskans deserve a competitive race. Alaskans deserve a choice other than Mike Dunleavy...On balance, it is my belief that despite my many differences with Mark Begich, his stance on the important issues I have listed above more closely align with my priorities for Alaska."⁷⁹

Sen. Dunleavy (R) went on to win the election by a 7% margin over Sen. Begich (D). Two electoral circumstances, however, could have re-elected Walker to a second term. First, Senator Begich could have dropped out. If there was a "spoiler" in this race, it is clear that it was the Democrat who consistently polled behind the incumbent independent and hard-line Republican. Second, Ranked Choice Voting would have counted second place preferences. Walker eventually dropped out of the race to encourage his supporters to vote for Begich. Ranked Choice Voting, however, allows voters to choose their favorite candidate without wasting their vote by allowing the second choice of voters to be considered if no candidate receives over 50% of first choice ballots.

⁷⁹Brooks, James. "[Alaska Gov. Bill Walker abandons election](#)". *The Juneau Empire* (Oct 2018).

CASE STUDY: RANKED CHOICE VOTING IN MAINE

Maine is a state notable for its history of independent leadership. In 2018, the Pine Tree State's senior U.S. Senator, Angus King, was re-elected with 54% of the vote. In 2016, three independents (Owen Casas, Denise Harlow and Kent Ackley) were elected to the state house and were later joined by one Republican (Noman Higgins) and two Democrats (Marty Grohman and Kevin Battle) who choose to leave their party and join the independent caucus. Further, two of the last seven governors of Maine were independents.

In 2014, centrist independent Eliot Cutler was blamed for “spoiling” the gubernatorial election. Cutler had earned 8% of the vote, an amount that could have propelled Democratic challenger Mike Michaud to victory over incumbent Paul LePage. Michaud received 43% of the vote, compared to LePage’s 48%. The outcome spurred renewed calls for a Ranked Choice Voting system, which was already in place in state’s largest city of Portland.

On a statewide ballot question in 2017, Maine voters approved a switch to Ranked Choice Voting. After a veto by the state legislature rooted in (unfounded) constitutional concerns, voters overrode the veto on another statewide ballot in the summer of 2018. For the first time in American history, Ranked Choice Voting was used to elect representatives to federal office in November 2018.

Because a candidate received at least 50% of the vote in the U.S. Senate and 1st Congressional District elections, Ranked Choice Voting did not determine the outcome. However, in a closely contested 2nd Congressional District, voters who chose an independent as their first choice had their second place votes count towards helping to determine the eventual outcome. The implementation of Ranked Choice Voting was declared a success by long-time election reform advocates, as well as major periodicals.

“Maine voters Tuesday became the first in the country to use Ranked Choice Voting in a statewide election, and despite predictions to the contrary, there was no widespread confusion or chaos.”

- Portland Press Herald Editorial Board⁸⁰

“Election officials in Maine declared Democrat Jared Golden to be the first member of Congress elected by ‘Ranked-Choice Voting’ (“RCV”). Maine’s idea should now be adopted by New Hampshire for its presidential primary, and by battleground states for the general election as well.

- Lawrence Lessig, Harvard University Professor in USA Today⁸¹

“Maine is a commonsensical kind of state, with a pragmatic, problem-solving outlook. Its experiment with Ranked-Choice Voting, currently in the news for replacing the preliminary plurality winner with a more broadly popular choice in Maine’s sprawling Second Congressional District, provides a useful electoral

⁸⁰Editorial Board. “[Our View: Ranked-choice test run makes electoral history in Maine](#)”. *Portland Press Herald* (June 2018).

⁸¹Lessig, Lawrence. “[Ranked-choice voting worked in Maine. Now we should use it in presidential races](#)” *USAToday* (Nov 2018).

Pre-election polls and post-election focus groups with voters in Maine’s 1st Congressional District highlight the advantages of Ranked Choice Voting for independent candidates, while also providing insight into the limitations of its effects on election outcomes.⁸³ The election is worth examination because the independent candidate appearing on the ballot, state Representative Martin Grohman, ran a credible campaign and was certainly qualified for the office he sought. Before entering elected office, Grohman was the founder and owner of a successful business that sold hardwood deck materials around the world; he had also served on a number of local and statewide commissions. In 2014, he was elected to the state legislature as a Democrat, and following his 2016 re-election became a political independent. In 2017, Grohman was named state “Legislator of the Year” by the American Legion and was consistently ranked as one of the most bipartisan legislators in the state house.⁸⁴

Grohman campaigned for over one year, earned the endorsement of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and had a competitive electoral infrastructure that included a campaign team and voter data in place. He spent \$363,798 on the campaign, significantly more than his Republican opponent spent (\$93,695) but only about a third of what the Democrat incumbent spent (\$1,081,634).

Surveys and focus groups of voters from Grohman’s district demonstrated a few common viewpoints voters had about the Ranked Choice Voting system.⁸⁵

- **VOTERS GENERALLY ENJOYED THE RANKED CHOICE VOTING EXPERIENCE**, citing a freedom to vote for the candidate they liked most, an assurance the winner would have majority support, and the fact that it reduced negative campaigning.

One voter remarked how Ranked Choice Voting changes the types of leaders who are rewarded: “I think it’s less about winning and losing and more about [electing] the right person overall.” This positive sentiment was shared by other focus group participants.

While voters in the focus groups generally agreed that Ranked Choice Voting was a positive experience, the data show that not all voters took advantage of the new system. In Maine’s 2nd Congressional District, 35% of voters who cast their first choice ballot for one of the two independents did not choose a second place candidate.⁸⁶ It’s reasonable to presume this number is *even higher* for voters who cast first place votes for one of the two major party candidates, though this data is not public information. A small minority of focus group participants said they only

⁸² Editorial Board. “[Ranked-choice voting passes the test in Maine](#)”, *The Boston Globe* (Nov 2018).

⁸³ Unite America. “Maine Political Party Groups”, *IPSOS Polling & Research* (Nov 2018). IPSOS conducted a series of 3 focus groups on November 14, 2018 in Portland, Maine.

⁸⁴ Reid, Greg. “[A different route to making a difference](#)”. *Pine Tree Watch* (Oct 2018).

⁸⁵ Unite America. “Maine Political Party Groups”, *IPSOS Polling & Research* (Nov 2018). IPSOS conducted a series of 3 focus groups on November 14, 2018 in Portland, Maine.

⁸⁶ Department of SoS - Bureau of Corporations, Elections, and Commissions - Maine. “[Tabulations of Elections held in 2018](#)” (2018).

voted for one person because they did not understand how the system worked, despite over two years of voter education efforts by elected officials and advocacy organizations. Yet other voters simply stated they did not vote for a second place candidate because they did not like the system and preferred to vote as they always had: just for one candidate.

As voters become more informed and comfortable with Ranked Choice Voting, the windfall benefits of Ranked Choice Voting for independent candidates will slowly become more realized. In the meantime, independent candidates and organizations supporting them still have an active role to play in articulating the merits of the system and how it works.

- **SPOILER CONCERNS WERE ASSUAGED FOR SOME VOTERS**, but Marty Grohman did only slightly better than comparatively resourced independent candidates for Congress. Unlike other three-way races, voters in Maine did not frequently list a fear of “wasting” their vote as a reason to not support Grohman. Yet on election day, Grohman only received 9% of the vote. To win, Grohman would have needed to win at least another 85,000 first place votes⁸⁷ and earned nearly all second place votes from voters who supported his Republican opponent.

A few Grohman voters did indicate that without Ranked Choice Voting, they would have feared spoiling the election, and supported a different candidate. **However, these voters were few and far between.** Instead, a majority of the people who did not vote for Grohman indicated they had either not heard about his campaign, did not agree with his policy platform, had a strong affinity for another candidate, or had a strong affinity for one of the two political parties.

The upshot is that Ranked Choice Voting may help overcome an initial hurdle with some voters by eliminating a reason *not* vote for an independent candidate. But a compelling set of reasons to vote *for* the independent candidate is still required.

“I think [Ranked Choice Voting] gives you the benefit of being able to vote in a way that you’re not against somebody. Many times you feel like, oh, I need to vote for this person because I definitely don’t want that person, and I know this person is who I really want, but they’re not going to get enough votes, so I’m throwing away my vote. So, **I feel more empowered when I have Ranked Choice Voting.** I feel more free to vote for the people I have the strongest convictions about without feeling that I’m voting against somebody else. And that’s a really freeing feeling once you understand how it works.”

- Maine Voter

- **VOTERS WERE FRUSTRATED THE SYSTEM DID NOT APPLY TO THE WHOLE BALLOT.** Ranked Choice Voting was enacted for the two federal elections on voters’ ballot (U.S. Senate and U.S. House). For state-elected offices, including governor, state senate, and state house, voters used a traditional, “first-past-the-post” voting system in which they could only vote

⁸⁷ More than one half of these “new” first place votes would have had to come from voters who cast first place votes for Chellie Pingree.

for one candidate.⁸⁸ Voters in the city of Portland switched back to Ranked Choice Voting when they reached city and school board elections lower on their ballot.

One voter articulated the confusion many voters faced once in the ballot box: “[Ranked Choice Voting] didn’t apply across the board, so you had to stop and look, okay wait, how am I ranking this now and what am I voting for?”

Another voter lamented they were not able to rank independent Terry Hayes first in her campaign for governor: “I like [Ranked Choice Voting]. I just wish that we were able to vote for governor with ranked choice as well.”

- **SECOND PLACE VOTES WERE OFTEN CAST AGAINST A THIRD OPTION.**

Asked why Grohman was their second choice, many voters admitted their selection was often a vote *against* their third choice candidate — even though voters admitted to knowing little about Grohman. When asked why he ranked Grohman second and Pingree first, one Democratic voter commented, “I just know more about Chellie, including her history. To me, [Grohman] was an unknown,” while a Republican voter who also voted for Grohman second commented “I didn’t know who he was until three weeks out. Not enough time to find out very much about him.”

Moderate, independent candidates intuitively will often become the second choice preference of party-line voters. This manifestation of negative partisanship may benefit independent candidates under the Ranked Choice Voting system, but *only if* they receive more first place votes than one of their partisan opponents.

Though voter fears about “wasting” their vote and “spoiling” were mitigated, other previously noted challenges associated with being an independent candidate remained. Notably:

- **A LACK OF A STRONG BRAND OR NAME IDENTITY.** A poll conducted a week before the election found 51% of CD-1 voters reported they had seen or heard nothing when asked “compared to some of the other elections in your area, how much have you heard or seen about Marty Grohman campaign for Congress?” Only 5% responded “a lot” with 42% responding “a little.”

Coded responses of 3655 survey respondents shared why they did *not* plan to vote for Grohman:

⁸⁸ The constitutional amendment approved by voters in 2017, and again in 2018, only modified the electoral system for federal offices.

table 13

NOT VOTING FOR GROHMAN

| Broad Category | # of Respondents | Illustrative Examples |
|---|------------------|--|
| I had never heard of Marty or don't know enough about him | 277 | "Never heard of Him" "No clue who he is" "Not sure what he stands on issues" |
| I like Chellie or I vote Democrat | 39 | "Chellie has more experience" "Pedigree is very good" "[I'm] voting straight Democratic" |
| He's an independent or doesn't have a chance to win | 20 | "Because we aren't informed enough about these independents" "I don't think he has a realistic chance of winning" |
| I like Republicans and/or Mark Holbrook | 12 | "Because I know mark Holbrook" "NRA endorsed Mark" |
| Marty is actually a Republican | 7 | "He's Republican" "Will refuse to vote Republican" "I'm sick of Republicans" |
| He's unprepared or inexperienced | 2 | "I don't think he had enough information with his answers. He isn't prepared." |
| Total | 357 | |

- MOST PEOPLE BELIEVE THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IS BROKEN**, but generally were skeptical of endorsing the statement “traditional parties and politicians don’t care about people like me.” The conversations reinforced that voters often like *their* elected leaders, even if they view the system and the parties unfavorably. Asked what they thought of the direction of the country, one participant said “there’s a lot of unkindness and division because people don’t respect each other’s opinions,” while another remarked “I’m very concerned about the violence and the unrest among many people.”

These findings complement national surveys that find congressional approval has hovered around 20% for the last decade, while congressional reelection rates remain above 80%. Most independent candidates are not incumbents, and hence face the same challenge all non-incumbents face: voters generally re-elect their current representatives.

- **MARTY’S “FIX NOT FIGHT” MESSAGE RESONATED, BUT IT LACKED POLICY DETAILS.** After viewing a campaign advertisement that emphasised Grohman’s problem solving approach, focus group participants were impressed, but also expressed concern that no specific policy ideas or priorities were articulated. For independents, these participants noted they needed more information to support an independent candidate than they would traditionally need in deciding between candidates of the two major parties.

“He [Grohman] made a statement [“Fix Not Fight”] that probably everyone would agree with, but I still don’t know how he’s going to fix it,” said one Maine Voter

A pre-election poll found a similar concern about voting for an independent. 51% of voters said they agreed with the statement, “To vote for an independent candidate, I need to know more about them personally and their stances on issues than I would need to know about a Democrat or Republican candidate.” Only 20% disagreed.

table 14

VOTER ATTITUDES TOWARDS INDEPENDENTS

| A pre-election poll in Maine’s 1st Congressional District asked voters the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Netural | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|---------|--------------|----------------|
| An independent elected official can better represent the people than a party-aligned candidate. | 17.0% | 7.4% | 29.7% | 25.8% | 16.0% |
| An independent elected official can better work across the aisle to get things done than a party-aligned candidate. | 15.9% | 6.5% | 23.4% | 30.6% | 19.5% |
| To vote for an independent candidate, I need to know more about them personally and their stances on issues than I would need to know about a Democrat or Republican candidate. | 16.1% | 4.3% | 15.5% | 12.1% | 38.6% |
| Voting for an independent candidate is often a wasted vote. | 33.4% | 10.3% | 15.1% | 18.4% | 18.9% |
| Voting for an independent candidate may cause my least preferred candidate to be elected. | 17.1% | 5.6% | 19.2% | 19.2% | 30.9% |
| An independent will be less effective in office than a Democrat or Republican. | 48.9% | 10.1% | 21.6% | 7.0% | 7.2% |
| Independent candidates are usually just Democrats in disguise. | 41.3% | 6.8% | 11.0% | 15.2% | 15.3% |
| Independent candidates are usually just Republicans in disguise. | 61.1% | 13.8% | 11.9% | 3.4% | 3.2% |

SECTION III: TASKS FOR THE FUTURE

The Key Learnings outline the current challenges and opportunities for independent candidates, based on experiences in the 2018 cycle. But the question remains: what can candidates, organizations, and other leaders do to better position the independent movement for success in the future?

Three key tasks have been identified:

Task #1: Build an Identity

“Why would you want to be nonpartisan? If you’re a partisan, you know what you stand for. People know what the Democrats stand for (tax and spend), they know what Republicans stand for (which is America), and then you can decide which one you want to support.”

-Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*⁸⁹

This report has documented the clear gap between voters’ stated willingness to vote for a political independent, and their actual willingness to do so. Based on candidate experiences in 2018, we found that independent voters are not a sustainable base of support for independent candidates, even in two-way election contests. Furthermore, there are no built-in constituencies within the American electorate that will deliver consistent, majority support for independent candidates.

This challenge can be explained by the fact that the label “independent” does not clarify what independent voters *desire*, nor what independent candidates *stand for*.

While major party candidates benefit from the heuristic cues associated with the Democratic and Republican brand, independent candidates have no such established identity with which to associate themselves. The consequence is that individuals, organizations, philanthropists, activists, and others keen to build a third political party or support independent candidates must build a clear identity for what it means to be independent. This new brand should be both *well-defined* so as to signal to voters what candidates stand for, while also serving as a *big-tent* capable of inspiring apathetic voters to join and motivating partisan voters to leave their tribes.

This section does not offer recommendations on what the new identity should be. It also does not offer analysis on whether building a third political identity is possible, especially given the current political climate. Rather, this report offers a framework for considering the function the two current partisan identities and provides a case for either repairing the damage these identities are causing, or building a competing one.

⁸⁹Dalton, Russel. *The Apartisan American* (2012). pp. 1

A USEFUL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING PARTISAN IDENTITIES

Dr. Lilliana Mason is a professor in the Department of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland. Her academic career has focused on the construction and value of political partisan identities and how the American electorate has slowly sorted itself along social, economic, and geographic lines. Her 2018 book *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* reviews an extensive literature on the history and evolution of partisanship in the American political system, provides groundbreaking data analysis on the American National Election Survey, and draws upon psychology and sociology research to inform a compelling thesis: partisan affiliation now often serves as a mega-identity in which voting preferences often indicate an individual's religion, race, gender, financial background and more.⁹⁰

Reproducing the data and full arguments are beyond the scope of this report, but the topline ideas of the thesis are shared as a way of informing how future leaders can think about building a new political identity.

Natural, psychological motivations are dividing the American electorate into two-warring tribes—political mega-identities—which are increasingly sorted according to social group identities, such as race, social standing, and religion.

Dr. Mason: “The American political parties are growing socially polarized. Religion and race, as well as class, geography, and culture are dividing the parties in such a way that the effect of party identity is magnified. The competition is no longer between only the Democrats and Republicans. A single vote can now indicate a person's partisan preference as well as his or her religion, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, and favorite grocery store. This is no longer a single social identity. Partisanship can now be thought of as a mega-identity, with all the psychological and behavioral magnifications that implies.” (Pg. 14)

Voters are more apt to allow parties to shape their policy preferences than they are to switch tribes based on a policy disagreement with their current one.

Dr. Mason: “More often than not, citizens do not choose which party to support based on policy opinion; they alter their policy opinion according to which party they support. Usually they do not notice that this is happening, and most, in fact, feel outraged when the possibility is mentioned. All citizens want to believe their political values are solid and well reasoned. More often, though, policy attitudes grow out of group-based defense.” (Pg. 21)

⁹⁰ Mason, Lilliana. *Uncivil Agreement: How politics became our identity* (2018).

Group members are prejudiced against out-group individuals; this is especially true with partisan identities which often cloud thinking and distract people from focusing on the public interest.

Dr. Mason: “There is something inherent in a group identity that causes group members to be biased against their opponents. All of the political arguments over taxes, welfare, abortion, compassion, responsibility, and the ACA are built on a base of automatic and primal feelings that compel partisans to believe that their group is right, regardless of the content of the discussion. A partisan prefers his or her own team party for rational, policy-based reasons but also for irrational, automatic, self-defensive reasons. This can cause irrational behavior in the search for victory. It can also cause very deep feelings of prejudice towards other partisans.” (Pg. 50)

Voters are resistant—and often adamantly opposed—to supporting candidates outside of their tribe, even if they are aligned with those candidates on policy priorities and plans.

Dr. Mason: [There is an] “ingrained prejudice that grows out of the increasing alignment between our partisan, ideological, racial and religious social identities. This is a distinctly social phenomenon, unbound by the extremity of policy attitudes, but undeniable a sign of a polarizing electorate. Political scientists can disagree until we are blue in the face over the extent of America’s policy polarization, but are citizens prejudiced in their evaluations of political opponents? Absolutely. Even when they agree with them.” (Pg. 77)

As social and political identities have aligned, emotions and anger towards people on the other “team” have risen as commonalities between people in opposing groups have slowly disappeared.

Dr. Mason: “[J]ust as Americans are growing increasingly angry at their opponents’ candidates, they are growing increasingly enthusiastic about their own. Combine this anger and pride in every presidential election, and we see a picture of an electorate that is increasingly emotionally reactive. As time progresses, American partisans are more likely to feel angry at their opponents and proud of their own candidates. We are priming the pump for a very energetic battle.” (Pg. 83)

Dr. Mason’s research – combined with what we have learned about the viability and appeal of independent candidates who ran in 2018 – suggest that a compelling political identity is essential for independent candidates and/or any credible effort to build a third political party.

That political identity must:

1. **Align a new coalition** of social, economic, and demographic constituencies while offering clear, specific policy goals to the issues most salient to voters.
2. **Iterate and innovate on messages quickly** while remaining responsive to both short-term and long-term drivers of voter behaviour;
3. **Focus on where both parties have come up short** in both building the base (i.e. by identifying the voters who feel neglected by both parties) and in articulating a new policy agenda (i.e. by identifying issues in which both parties are leading the country in a dangerous direction).

In a post-election conversation, Axios CEO Jim VandeHei constructively criticized independent candidates who have focused on political process arguments and advocated for a brand of “centrism” between the two major political parties, something for which few voters in either political party have expressed an appetite.⁹¹ Instead, VanderHei argued, independent candidates should give voters a reason to fire both political parties by emphasizing issues neither is addressing. VanderHei shared two priorities that independent candidates could champion, drawing clear contrasts with the two parties.

- Amid the longest federal government shutdown in American history over if — and how — best to fund border security in early 2019, China continued to extend its global reach as it builds trade infrastructure from southeast Asia to Europe and Africa. Independents could position themselves as common-sense negotiators in arguments over the wall so they can focus on the more pressing, long-term threat facing the United States: the rise of an authoritarian Chinese government.
- As Republicans pass out subsidies to corporations and Democrats write regulations to cement the power of public unions, neither party is seriously addressing the coming advent of artificial intelligence and mass-automation that will disrupt every industry in the American economy. Preserving the dignity of work, building a safety-net for the 21st Century, and elevating the need for retraining programs are the types of economic priorities that could inspire a new coalition of voters.

Heading into the 2020 election where the divide between the sitting president and his opponents will likely force an even more binary choice on voters than in the 2018 cycle, it seems the opportunity to create a third political identity is limited. Yet, as President Trump proved in 2016, building new coalitions around a new set of priorities can happen quickly and around unique leaders.

⁹¹ Unite America [2019] ‘Chicago Debrief Meeting’, *Minutes of Chicago Debrief Meeting*.

Task #2: Unrig and reform the electoral system

Like in many duopolies, Democratic and Republican lawmakers have insulated themselves from competition by raising the barrier to entry for independent candidates. At all levels of government, straight party voting, ballot access requirements, sore loser laws, and campaign finance disparities are the most tangible ways incumbents have rigged the rules in their favor. Making a switch to a National Popular Vote from the electoral college and lowering the requirements to qualify for nationally televised debates would further level the playing field for presidential candidates running outside the two party system.

Ranked Choice Voting: Ranked Choice Voting removes the “spoiler” argument independent candidates often face by allowing voters to rank their candidates in order of preference and counting second place preferences if no candidate receives a majority of first place votes. Ranked Choice Voting removes the “spoiler” argument independent candidates often face. No longer facing a fear of “wasting” their vote, voters have reported being more open to supporting independents in Ranked Choice Voting elections. Maine is the only state that uses Ranked Choice Voting for federal elections, adopting the system in 2018.

Multi-member districts: Many countries around the world use proportional representation systems in which multiple leaders represent the same constituents. In the United States there are seven states that have multi-member districts in which voters can cast one vote and the top two finishers are elected. Under proportional systems, the electorate is more fully represented given the opportunity to elect multiple members to represent the same district. Independent voters and voters from the minority party often are represented by at least one elected leader who is not from the majority party.

Top-Two Primaries: Top-two primaries (or “jungle primaries”) place all candidates for an elected position in the same primary, no matter their party affiliation. From this single, combined primary voters select two candidates to advance to the general election. Such a system makes it more likely that credible, independent candidates will see a two-way general election, especially if they can mobilize normally low-propensity primary voters.

Top-Four RCV Primaries: In their groundbreaking report *Why Competition in the Politics Industry is Failing America: A Strategy for Reinvigorating American Democracy*, Harvard Business Professor Michael Porter and political reformer Katherine Gehl suggest the implementation of nonpartisan top-four primaries. All candidates would run in the same primary, with voters selecting four candidates to advance to a general election, which ideally

would be conducted using a Ranked Choice Voting System. According to Gehl and Porter, such a system may reduce the barriers to entry for independents including ballot access and media attention.⁹²

Nonpartisan Ballots:

As Key Learning #2 identified, the word “Republican” and “Democrat” is a heuristic to voters at the ballot box, allowing voters to generally understand where on the political spectrum a candidate falls. Because independents are by nature not affiliated with any party or policy agenda, they face an inherent disadvantage: voters don’t know, generally, their political orientations. Many municipalities in the United States do not list party affiliations of local candidates on election ballots. While candidates can self identify themselves as “Democrats,” “Republicans,” or “Independents” they must expend personal resources and energy in order to do so. The practice could be extended to state and federal ballot lines.

Straight Party Voting:

In nine states, voters can simply check one box or pull a single lever to vote for all candidates from their preferred political party. Straight Party Voting creates an incentive for voters: with a single action, cast a ballot for all the candidates on your team. Independent candidates, who must convince party voters to cast ballots outside of their partisan tribes, depend on support from partisans straying from the line, even if it’s just for one race.

Further, this system results in more voters skipping down-ballot races where their party may not have a candidate; these party voters first preference for a down-ballot race might be for the independent candidate, but because the system encourages tribal voting, they do not end up casting a vote for the independent.

Ballot Access Requirements: Independent candidates must meet varying state requirements to appear on the ballot. In Washington state, independents are treated like their Republican and Democratic opponents, and must simply pay a filing fee to appear on the top-two primary ballot. In contrast, in Georgia, for example, independents must collect signatures totalling 5% of the total number of voters who voted in the previous election for that office; a 2020 candidate seeking State Senate District 1 would need to collect 3,478 signatures, a big and expensive ask.

Ballot access rules at the presidential level require independent and third party candidates spend an incredible amount of money and time

⁹²Gehl, Katherine and Porter, Michael. “[Why Competition in the politics industry is failing America](#)” (Sept 2017). pp. 39.

gathering signatures. In California, for example, a 2020 presidential candidate would be required to gather 196,000 signatures in a 105-day period.

Fundraising Disparities: As with ballot access rules, independent candidates are often disadvantaged by how much money they can raise and from whom. In Colorado, for example, party candidates for state senate can accept up to \$22,125 directly from the state party committee, which in turn can raise money from individuals, PACs, businesses and 527s in amounts up to \$3,650. Independent candidates, meanwhile, have no party apparatus to support in fundraising, while also facing the following donation restrictions: people (max: \$400), PACs (max: \$400), and small donor committees (max: \$4,850)

“Sore Loser” Laws: If a leader runs for office in a party primary and loses, many states forbid that candidate from running in the general election as an independent. These sore loser laws prohibit the electorate from another option on their November ballots who may be unacceptable to a party base in a primary, but acceptable to a more moderate general electorate.

Presidential Debate Access: Currently, independent or third party candidates must poll at 15% in order to be invited by the Commission on Presidential Debates. Such a prohibition restricts credible candidates from reaching an audience of millions of voters at a critical stage in the campaign, which often propels party candidates further ahead of independent candidates, who do not benefit from the free media platform. In turn, these candidates are seen as less viable by voters.

Task #3: Improve Infrastructure

Critical components of campaign infrastructure — donors, volunteers, campaign staff, pollsters, digital consultants, media companies, compliance experts, and even mail houses — increasingly only support candidates from one of the two major parties.

In surveys of more than 30 independent campaigns from 2018, candidates and campaign managers reported the lack of pre-existing support networks creating unique hurdles. Having to start from scratch to identify key components of a campaign structure placed many independent candidates behind their partisan opponents.

If there's one recommendation with the broadest consensus amongst 2018 independent candidates and operatives, it is that **money and people** are the two most valuable commodities for an independent candidacy.

While candidates have some control over their fundraising by being disciplined about how much time they spend on the phone, extending beyond comfort zones to ask their networks to pitch in, and by investing time to plan events, these are challenges that all candidates face. In order to compete with the two parties, however, independents must develop the national donor network of benefactors committed to supporting a new brand of candidate outside the two party system, a challenge no single candidate is likely to be able to solve on their own.

In addition to countless third parties working at the local, state, and federal level, there are several organizations committed to supporting independent candidates. These institutions should seek to work together to level the political playing field with structural rule changes and collaborative efforts that develop key components of electoral infrastructure. Further, these organizations should seek to connect their candidates so leaders can share best practices with each other.

SECTION IV: BEST PRACTICES FROM 2018 CANDIDATES

Surveys with 29 independent candidates and campaign managers as well as post-election polling and focus groups with voters inform the following set of best practice recommendations for future independent candidates. These tactical recommendations are meant to inform *how* independents can run winning campaigns.

Best Practice #1: Process arguments are not enough. Independents must tell their story and take clear policy stances on the issues which matter most to voters.

Independent candidates should be candidates first and foremost. Independent must follow second. Like any other candidate, independents must share personal stories that build trust amongst the people they seek to represent. Voters also desire a clear understanding of what candidates will specifically do if elected, including what their priorities are and what policy solutions they support.

Generally, voters know where candidates from each major party are likely to stand on important issues like the economy, healthcare, and immigration. They are also conditioned to listen for personal biographies and what qualities about a leader qualifies them for office. **Without a well-defined brand, independents face the challenge of sharing their identities and perspectives. When they do not take clear positions on the most salient issues, voters become even more confused!**

Polls commissioned by Unite America and conducted by leading research groups have consistently shown the lack of unity and special interest corruption to be highly salient issues. Yet talking about solutions to these problems is only meaningful to voters if the message is directly connected to people's lives. There is a big difference between talking about redrawing district lines to make congressional seats more competitive, and ending gerrymandering in a way that forces legislators to work with each other to solve issues like infrastructure, educational opportunity, and job growth.

Further, when voters are asked to list the one or two issues most important to them in deciding how to vote, they rarely mention bipartisanship or process-oriented reforms.

table 15

BIGGEST ISSUE FACING AMERICA

| What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today? ⁹³ | | | |
|---|---------------|----------------|-----------|
| Issue | December 2018 | September 2018 | June 2018 |
| The government/poor leadership | 19% | 29%* | 19% |
| Economic problems | 14% | 12% | 15% |
| Immigration | 16% | 12% | 14% |
| Unifying the country | 8% | 7% | 4% |
| Race relations/racism | 7% | 9% | 7% |
| Poverty/Hunger/Homelessness | 6% | 4% | 3% |
| Healthcare | 5% | 5% | 4% |
| Environment/Pollution | 5% | 1% | 2% |

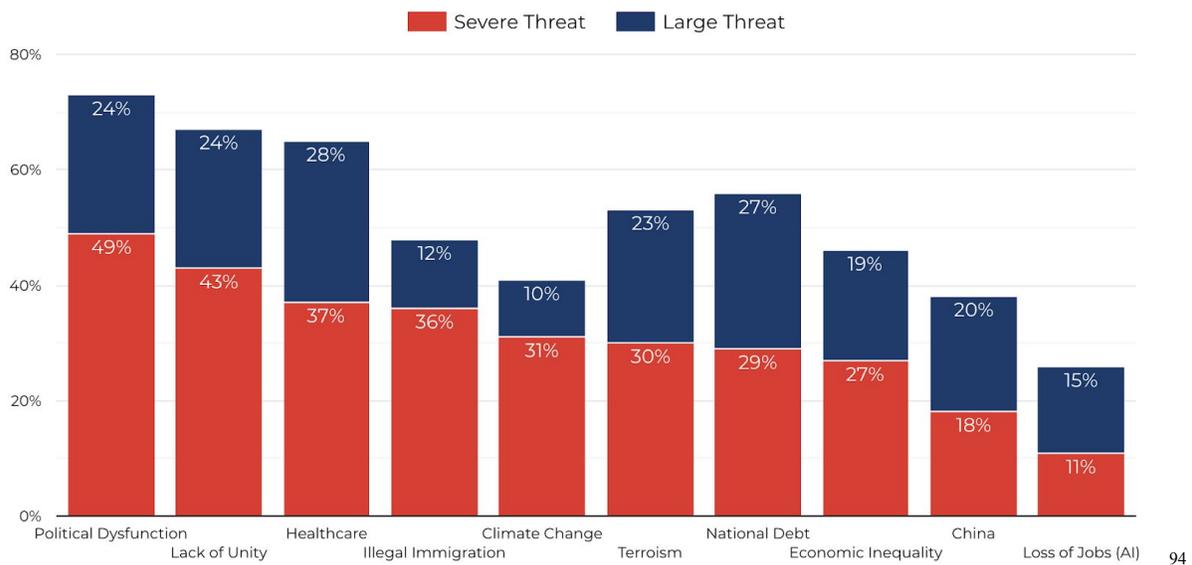
**In September 2018, poor leadership spiked amid the Judge Kavanaugh hearings. Candidates up and down the ballot were asked about the issue, often forced to take a “yes” or “no” stance on whether he should be confirmed for a seat on the Supreme Court. Paying attention to both national and local hot button issues, and quickly adopting clear stances is just as critical for independents as it is for a candidate from the two major parties.*

⁹³ Gallup, “[Most Important Problem](#)” (last viewed: Feb 2019).

figure 9

THE THREATS FACING AMERICANS

DO YOU THINK THE FOLLOWING IS A THREAT TO AMERICA?



⁹⁴ Unite America. "New Hampshire 2020 Election Survey". *Triton Polling and Research* (2018).
Poll of 901 registered voters in NH conducted 12/04-12/05/18 with a margin of error of +/- 3.3%.

Three surveys in fall 2018 asked voters in different parts of the country the same question and provided three potential answers:

table 16

CANDIDATE QUALITIES

| “When voting for any candidate, what is the most important quality you look for?” | ME CD 1 ⁹⁵ | AZ LD 21 ⁹⁶ | CO HD 59 ⁹⁷ |
|---|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| They align with my views on issues that really matter to me, including social issues like guns and abortion | 55.0% | 57.3% | 56.6% |
| They have an ability to break through partisan gridlock and special interest corruption to represent the people | 36.5% | 32.2% | 34.6% |
| They are a member of the same political party I am | 6.2% | 5.9% | 4.4% |
| Not Sure / Don’t Know / Other | 2.3% | 4.6% | 4.4% |

A statewide survey of 2,026 Colorado voters in 2017 asked a similar question:

table 17

CANDIDATE QUALITIES

| “When thinking about voting in the next election, what criteria will be most important to you?” | Colorado Voters |
|---|-----------------|
| Candidates who have specific ideas and clear proposals on pressing issues like transportation, education or natural resources | 33.8% |
| Candidates who hold your same views on hot button issues like taxes, abortion, guns or immigration | 33.3% |
| Candidates who can break through the political gridlock and special interest dysfunction in government to solve problems | 28.4% |
| Not Sure / Don’t Know / Other | 4.6% |

⁹⁵ Unite America. “Maine Pre-Election Survey” *Triton Polling and Research* (2018).

Poll conducted amongst 443 ME CD 1 voters from 10/29-11/6/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.7%.

⁹⁶ Unite America. “Arizona Senate District 21 Post Election Survey” *Triton Polling and Research* (2018).

Poll conducted amongst 415 AZ LD 21 voters from 11/15-11/21/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.8%.

⁹⁷ Unite America. “Colorado House District 59 Post Election Survey” *Triton Polling & Research* (2018).

Poll conducted amongst 400 CO HD 59 voters from 11/9-11/18/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.9%

Voters in Maine’s 1st Congressional district were asked if they agreed with the statement: “To vote for an independent candidate, I need to know more about them personally and their stances on issues than I would need to know about a Democrat or Republican candidate.” 38% of poll respondents strongly agreed with the statement and a total of 60% agreed somewhat. Only 20% disagreed.

In analyzing over 20 years of American National Election Studies (ANES) data and in reviewing extensive literature on the subject, political scientist Russell Dalton noted the personal qualities of the candidate, including their perceived integrity and character, are the primary motivator of voter behavior amongst swing voters. Candidates’ public policy positions ranked second, followed by political party affiliation.⁹⁸

Undoubtedly taking more specific policy positions will alienate some voters, but when independent candidates fail to, they risk further alienating both sides by coming off as a mushy, middle-of-the-road politician who does not stand for anything. The upshot is that independents must let voters know *who* they are (biography) and *what* they stand for (issues).

“I don't think being centrist is a winning message. I think results is a winning message. I was personally wrong about this but talking to voters directly I learned it. They want results on key issues. If you agree on the key issues, then you can make a process argument, but **a process argument alone doesn't make you pull the lever.**”

- Marty Grohman | Independent Candidate, ME CD-1

“Even Craig O’Dear, the candidate who probably most passionately and clearly took on and answered tough questions like gun control and abortion, failed to get traction. I think it was because his core message, though he addressed the other ones, was a process message: fix a broken system that’s not serving you. **It wasn’t big and bold enough, even if it was true and real.**”

- Joel Searby | Senior Strategist, Unite America

“When talking about reform, we focused on gerrymandering and money in politics. We stayed away from things like ranked choice voting for the most part, and almost never talk about things like the fulcrum strategy.”

- Jay Geyer | Independent Candidate, CO HD-33

⁹⁸Dalton, Russel. *The Apartisan American* (2012) pp. 112-114.

Best Practice #2: Clearly define the value of independent leadership

While independent candidates must first share specific policy solutions and build a personal brand, they also must articulate why they are a political independent and not a member of the two major parties. Research, polling, and focus groups have all demonstrated voters understand the upside of electing an independent, even if they are unwilling to vote for one or do not think they can win.

To resonate with voters, independent leadership must be described as a solution to the problems voters care about most. In order to do so, independent candidates must:

- 1. SHOW HOW BROKEN POLITICS HAS LED TO BAD OUTCOMES.** Pointing to specific examples like long-wait lines at TSA amid government shutdowns, crumbling roads in the absence of long-term investments in infrastructure, and the lack of progress on educational outcomes because members of both parties are bought and paid for on the issue (Democrats by teacher unions and Republicans by private education “reformers”).
- 2. EXPLAIN THAT AS AN INDEPENDENT YOU WILL NOT BE A PART OF BROKEN POLITICS.** Free from any partisan or special interests, independents *can* represent everyone in their district. Independent candidates who ran in 2018 shared appealing to voters’ independent thinking resonated. When asked where they fell on the ideological spectrum, the response that “I’m an independent thinker” capable of following the facts and championing best ideas was a common theme.
- 3. CONVINCe VOTERS TO VOTE AGAINST THE SYSTEM, NOT JUST A PARTY.** Attack ads, a divisive media marketplace, and vitriolic activists on the ideological extremes are all forces facilitating the rise of negative partisanship, whereby voters are increasingly motivated to vote against the party they like least, instead of the party they like most. The challenge for independents is to convince voters that no matter which party wins, their life is unlikely to get better because the status quo of gridlock and tribalism will remain, so long as the system is controlled by two warring tribes.

THE MOST APPEALING QUALITIES OF AN INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE

Three polls commissioned by the Unite America Institute highlight the most appealing aspects of independent candidates to voters. Voters were asked if they strongly disagreed, disagreed, neither disagreed nor agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed with the following statements:

table 18

REASONS TO SUPPORT INDEPENDENTS

| Statement | Colorado ⁹⁹ | | Washington ¹⁰⁰ | | Virginia ¹⁰¹ | |
|---|------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Total Agree | Strongly Agree | Total Agree | Strongly Agree | Total Agree |
| Independents can represent all of the people, not just those from their party | 54% | 78% | 54% | 77% | 51% | 71% |
| Independents can find common ground between both parties and bridge the partisan divide | 47% | 74% | 49% | 70% | 57% | 74% |
| Independents would not be beholden to the party bosses and special interests | 48% | 71% | 49% | 71% | 45% | 63% |
| Independents can take the best ideas to solve problems no matter where they come from | 47% | 68% | 46% | 67% | 49% | 68% |

Polls conducted by other organizations and candidates also highlight the notion that representing **all people** is a unique and favorably viewed value proposition for independent candidates. For example:

- A 2018 survey of registered Maine voters found 42% of voters agreed with the statement “an independent elected official can better represent the people than a party-aligned candidate.” Only 24% disagreed.
- A 2017 survey of likely Kansas voters by EMC research found 84% support for an independent “leader who will serve the people of Kansas, and not the political elites who have ushered in an era of budget turmoil and party in-fight that simply has not produced results.”

⁹⁹ Unite America Institute, “[Colorado’s Sleeping Giant: Independent Voters and Candidates](#)” (August 2017)
Poll by Triton Polling & Research from 8/21-9/10/2017 with 2,026 respondents and a margin of error of +/- 2.2%

¹⁰⁰ Unite America Institute, “[Washington’s Sleeping Giant: Independent Voters and Candidates](#)” (April 2018)
Poll by Triton Polling & Research from 3/26-4/4/2018 with 606 respondents and a margin of error of +/- 4.0%

¹⁰¹ Unite America Institute, “[People Over Party: Bridging the Partisan Divide in Virginia](#)” (November 2018)
Poll by Triton Polling & Research from 9/7-9/12/2018 with 403 respondents and a margin of error of +/- 4.9%

- A 2018 poll in Arizona’s 21st Legislative District showed that of all pro-messages tested, the notion independent Kathy Knecht could represent all people in her district received the warmest reception across all partisan segments of the electorate.¹⁰²

table 19

REASONS TO SUPPORT KATHY KNECHT

| Does the following statement make you more likely to support independent Kathy Knecht? | Among Democrats | | Among Independents | | Among Republicans | | Combined (All voters) | |
|---|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| | Much more likely | Total More likely | Much more likely | Total More likely | Much more likely | Total More likely | Much more likely | Total More likely |
| Kathy is an entrepreneur who helped advise hundreds of emerging leaders in the West Valley. She is also a public servant who has served on her local school board for the last 12 years. | 51% | 82% | 34% | 41% | 14% | 48% | 31% | 64% |
| Kathy has been an independent for 23 years and she is running as an independent candidate because she thinks politics is too controlled by the political parties and special interests. She wants to represent all the people. | 61% | 86% | 49% | 88% | 18% | 54% | 38% | 71% |
| Kathy has a strong background in education policy and is an advocate for increased education funding and is opposed to privatization of schools. | 70% | 86% | 62% | 86% | 24% | 38% | 47% | 71% |
| Kathy’s policy priorities include supporting military veterans, improving water rights, addressing corruption, and increasing taxes on corporations to alleviate the tax burden for local property owners. | 66% | 83% | 55% | 79% | 25% | 43% | 44% | 63% |
| Kathy has received broad bipartisan support and many endorsements — including from Sharon Wolcott, the Democratic Mayor of Sunrise, and Roberta Voss, Republican former state house representative. | 42% | 76% | 28% | 58% | 15% | 32% | 26% | 51% |

¹⁰² Unite America. “Arizona Senate District 21 Post Election Survey” *Triton Polling and Research* (2018).
Poll conducted amongst 415 AZ LD 21 voters from 11/15-11/21/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.8%

Governor Walker’s campaign manager, John-Henry Heckendorn, noted that the most effective messages for the campaign were those that demonstrated that the Governor was a blue collar, lifelong Alaskan willing to follow his principles and do what was right for the people in his state, even if there were political consequences. These messages fared better than focusing on wonky political reform policy ideas (like the anti-corruption bill he championed in 2018 ¹⁰³) he championed as an independent because he was not a member of the two major parties.

INDEPENDENTS HAVE GOVERNED BEFORE

Independents can also point to policy successes of independents who have served in office if questioned on their ability to make a difference if elected. A 2018 report by the Unite America Institute highlighted some examples:¹⁰⁴

- In January 2018, State Senator Cheri Jahn (CO) left the Democratic party to become an independent. In the next legislative session, she became a critical facilitator of conversations between the Republican and Democratic caucuses, helping to pass a bill to provide much needed long-term funding for transportation infrastructure.
- Not bound to any traditional party platform, independents in Maine were strong defenders of the state’s new Ranked Choice Voting system adopted by voters in the 2016 election. During attempts to repeal the voter’s decision, independents defended the move and rallied support for a campaign which ultimately ensured Ranked Choice Voting implementation in 2018.
- When oil prices plummeted in 2016, Alaska state revenues fell by 80%, causing a \$3 billion budget deficit. Independent Governor Bill Walker — working with a bipartisan caucus in the state house for the last two years of his term — became the first Governor to cut the state’s permanent fund, a check written from public coffers to every resident each year. A terribly unpopular political decision, this policy change put the long-term interests of the state first. It’s a clear validation of a line Governor Walker repeatedly stated throughout his time in office: “I didn’t run for Governor to keep the job, I ran for Governor to do the job.”

Further, demonstrating that independent voters are the fastest growing — and largest — share of the American electorate, but lack nearly any representation in legislatures also resonated with voters. Jay Geyer, an independent candidate for state house in Colorado, noted “telling people that our district was over 40% registered independent voters seemed to really impress [them].”

VALUES-BASED APPROACH

Finally, many independent candidates shared the *Declaration of Independents* published by Unite America throughout the campaign and found pieces of it to be helpful, depending on their state and

¹⁰³ Griffiths, Shawn. “[Conservatives, Progressives Unite Against Powerful Interests to Pass Anti-Corruption Law](#)”, *Independent Voter Network* (July 2018).

¹⁰⁴ Unite America Institute, [Reimagining Governance in an Age of Polarization](#) (August 2018).

district. While these principles must be complemented with clear and distinct policy positions, future independents should feel free to use or build on the framework developed in the 2018 election cycle.

A DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENTS

As growing partisanship threatens to deepen the divides in our country, we join together as political independents to declare five common principles that we believe can unite a new movement to repair our politics and restore the American dream for future generations.

FIRST, WE PUT THE PUBLIC INTEREST AHEAD OF ANY PARTISAN OR SPECIAL INTEREST.

Government should represent “We, the people” — not the party leaders or those who can buy access to power. As independents, we believe good governance is about rising above petty partisanship and putting the people first.

SECOND, WE USE COMMON SENSE AND FIND COMMON GROUND TO SOLVE PROBLEMS.

We reject today’s zero sum politics and desire to work together with Democrats and Republicans in an inclusive and civil manner to get things done. As independents, we think for ourselves, understand different perspectives, follow the facts, identify root causes, offer new ideas, and make logical decisions.

THIRD, WE STAND FOR THE TIMELESS VALUES OF OPPORTUNITY, EQUALITY, AND STEWARDSHIP.

We want to empower every American to realize their full potential, uphold equal rights for all under the law, and ultimately leave a stronger country for the next generation. As independents, we believe in both fiscal and environmental responsibility.

FOURTH, WE CHAMPION COMPETITION, TRANSPARENCY, AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN POLITICS.

We seek to rebuild Americans’ trust in government by holding ourselves to the highest standards of honor and honesty and by fixing the broken incentives that contribute to political dysfunction. As independents, we support reforms to ensure our political process truly represents the people — including the way we draw district lines, fund campaigns, and run elections.

FIFTH, WE BELIEVE IN THE SHARED RESPONSIBILITY OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

As Americans, we understand it is our civic duty to be informed and engaged on important issues. As independents, we encourage increased citizen participation in our political process and in service to our country.

Best Practice #3: Find a wedge issue against your opponent(s)

Independent candidates must give voters a reason to fire the incumbent representative and offer a compelling reason for why people should break from both parties. Doing so requires finding a contrast issue (or set of them) where opponent(s) have clearly taken a policy position not in the best interest of the district's residents.

Future independent candidates running against incumbents in two-way races should closely examine the incumbent's voting record and attempt to identify an issue important to the district which (s)he would have voted differently. In three-way races, focusing on a single, salient issue that both party candidates have taken the same position may provide the best chance to break through.

One 2018 independent victor, Jim Roscoe, found a contrast issue and stuck to it throughout the campaign. A former Democrat who represented Wyoming's 22nd House District nearly a decade ago, Jim decided to run again for the seat amid growing frustration with the party system. As an independent in a two-way race, he emphasized a controversial vote on public land use that his Republican opponent had taken in the previous legislative session to allow federal public lands to be transferred to the state.

Roscoe's district stretches nearly from Wilson to Daniel, and includes hundreds of square miles of Grand Teton National Park. Throughout the campaign, he emphasized that sustainable development of natural resources like lithium and trona must happen on the terms of the people in the district, not bureaucrats in the state capitol. After election day, he was invited by both parties to caucus with them.¹⁰⁵

One independent incumbent in Alaska lost because his only opponent focused on a wedge issue. After serving 16 years as a Republican, Representative Paul Seaton left his party and ran his 2018 campaign as an independent. Appealing to a district with a majority Republican voters and in-step with the Republican candidate for Governor, his opponent, Sarah Vance, attacked Representative Seaton for his vote on the future of the state's permanent fund. The previous year, Representative Seaton had worked with a bipartisan caucus of Republican, Democrat, and independent legislators to reduce the amount of money sent to Alaskans as a part of the state's permanent fund program. The reform clearly puts the state on a better fiscal path, but rolling back how much money was returned to voters was politically unpopular in many districts across the state.

In three-way races, independents can find wedge issues too. In 1992, Ross Perot's independent campaign narrowly focused on balancing the federal budget, a responsibility both parties had abdicated over the preceding decades.¹⁰⁶ Perot was leading in the polls in July before inexplicably dropping out of the race, only to rejoin it later. Nevertheless, the elevation of the issue in the American conscious had an impact beyond election day, and President Clinton eventually balanced the budget in 1998.

¹⁰⁵ Cottier, Cody. "[Roscoe defies history to win as independent](#)", Jackson Hole Daily (Nov 2018).

¹⁰⁶ Holmes, Steven. "[THE 1992 CAMPAIGN: Ross Perot; Perot Plan to Attack Deficit Thrusts Issue at Opponents](#)", *New York Times* (Sept 1992).

In 2018, Jay Geyer created a wedge issue during his campaign for State House District 33 in Colorado. Jay refused to take money from PACs; both of his opponents accepted contributions from special interest groups and lobbyists. In an interview with the Denver Post¹⁰⁷ and during a candidate forum, Geyer was able to demonstrate this clear contrasts with both opponents.

“During the campaign, I had three ‘bases:’ (i) never-Trump Republicans (ii) business-oriented Democrats (iii) true moderate independents. I tried to keep my message consistent, but would **emphasize lowering health care costs and creating high-paying jobs as themes that appealed to wide audiences.**”

- Neal Simon | Independent candidate, Maryland U.S. Senate

“**Advice: come out early and bold with a differentiated message.** Go door to door with that as soon as you can.”

- Thea Chase | Independent Candidate, CO HD-54

¹⁰⁷ The Denver Post, “[Colorado House District 33 candidate Q&A](#)”, *The Denver Post* (Oct 2018).

Best Practice #4: Reject the premise of the spoiler argument

The notion that independents will take a disproportionate share of votes from one major party candidate, causing the other to win is the toughest messaging challenge independents face in three-way races. This “spoiler” argument necessarily assumes votes “belong” to parties and their candidates, rather than the voters — who desperately want to vote for a new way forward in our politics but are increasingly persuaded by fear-induced messaging to vote against the tribe they prefer least.

The same polls of Virginia, Colorado, and Washington voters cited above also asked voters why they might not support an independent candidate. The notion that an independent could spoil an election was the top concern for people in all three states. This requires independent candidates to address the issue directly, rejecting the premise of the argument by clearly stating **votes belong to people, not parties**.

table 21

WHY VOTERS DON'T SUPPORT INDEPENDENTS

| Statement | Colorado ¹⁰⁸ | | Washington ¹⁰⁹ | | Virginia ¹¹⁰ | |
|--|-------------------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | Strongly Agree | Total Agree | Strongly Agree | Total Agree | Strongly Agree | Total Agree |
| Voting for an independent might waste my vote or may cause my least favorite candidate to get elected | 31% | 50% | 44% | 60% | 41% | 59% |
| It can be difficult to vote for an independent candidate because I don't know where they stand on the issues important to me | 22% | 41% | 28% | 44% | 26% | 38% |
| I am committed to voting for candidates from my party. | 18% | 35% | 13% | 27% | 21% | 36% |
| Electing an independent may cause control of the legislature to switch parties | 20% | 35% | 12% | 28% | 20% | 33% |
| I don't think they could be effective in office since the legislature is controlled by the parties | 16% | 31% | 17% | 29% | 19% | 31% |

¹⁰⁸ Unite America Institute, “[Colorado’s Sleeping Giant: Independent Voters and Candidates](#)” (August 2017)
Poll by Triton Polling & Research from 8/21-9/10/2017 with 2,026 respondents and a margin of error of +/- 2.2%

¹⁰⁹ Unite America Institute, “[Washington’s Sleeping Giant: Independent Voters and Candidates](#)” (April 2018)
Poll by Triton Polling & Research from 3/26-4/4/2018 with 606 respondents and a margin of error of +/- 4.0%

¹¹⁰ Unite America Institute, “[People Over Party: Bridging the Partisan Divide in Virginia](#)” (November 2018)
Poll by Triton Polling & Research from 9/7-9/12/2018 with 403 respondents and a margin of error of +/- 4.9%

The most effective rebuttals to the spoiler argument rely on turning the argument on its head, and asking voters what they want to see in Washington and in state capitals. Sentiments that “*You can’t spoil a rotten system*” and “*The only way to waste your vote is to cast it for one more Republican or Democrat*” were messages candidates found resonated with voters.

Candidates also found it effective to ask: “*Do you really think sending one more Republican or one more Democrat to Washington is going to save anything?*” In these conversations, explaining the value of the Fulcrum Strategy can be particularly effective in states with closely divided legislatures. The notion that just one or two independents could deny both parties a majority, force them to work together, while simultaneously giving more voice to constituents in a district represented by an independent can be a compelling message.

PIVOTING ON THE SPOILER QUESTION

Ranked Choice Voting is an alternative voting method that gives voters more choice, voice and power in the political process. It also eliminates the spoiler argument. Independent candidates can confess that the last thing they want to be is a spoiler, using it as just one more reason to build support for Ranked Choice Voting and show their pragmatic, problem-solving approach.

When voters identify a problem — whether that be affordable healthcare or the prospect of a race being spoiled — they reward candidates who offer real solutions. Independents should take the opportunity to empathize with voters and offer a concrete solution.

“You can’t spoil a rotten system.”

- Craig O’Dear | Independent Candidate, U.S. Senate in Missouri

“Your vote is a reflection of YOU. It is a reflection of the message you want to send—your hopes and dreams.”

- Greg Orman | Independent Candidate, Governor of Kansas

“I voted for ranked-choice voting [because] I imagine that the candidate that finally won would be liked by a bigger majority of the citizenry, which would make it easier for that person to lead the state.”

- Maine Voter

“Voting independent is wasting a vote...and it could end up electing the candidate I don’t want.”

- Washington

Voter

Best Practice #5: Have a plan to make your race a two-way competition

Of the 254 independent state legislative candidates on the ballot in 2018, all 12 who won did so in two-way races. Two-way races provide independents with a clear political opportunity, but also a critical opportunity to introduce political competition, engage voters, and force a debate on important policy issues.

However, either because of natural self-sorting or artificial gerrymandering, districts without political competition tend to have a partisan makeup which significantly favors one of the two major parties; that's why the other does not compete!

The strategic upshot for future independents is that they must do two things:

1. Do all they can to make the race a two-way race.
2. If successful, win over voters from the party without a candidate and swing voters who traditionally lean — or even reliably support — the majority party in the district.

SEEKING TWO-WAY RACES

While independents can win three-way races, as the report has shown, two-way races offer independent candidates a significantly better opportunity to win and ultimately affect policy outcomes. While candidates should *not* engage in any practice intended to limit political competition or scare a partisan candidate off a ballot, there are a few ways independents can create political opportunity.

- **PICK THE RIGHT DISTRICT.** In 2018, 31% of state legislative races in the United States went uncontested by one of the two major parties.¹¹¹ Other recent election cycles have seen over 40% of seats uncontested, including in 2014 when 80% of Georgia's legislative seats did not offer voters any choice.¹¹² This may seem like a simple recommendation, but leaders who want to run for office as a political independent should research all the seats they are eligible for and select one unlikely to see competition from one major party.
- **DEMONSTRATE YOU ARE THE MOST VIABLE CANDIDATE TO BEAT A MUTUAL OPPONENT.** In 2014, Republican-turned-independent Bill Walker was running for Governor in Alaska. Months of campaigning by Walker and his Democratic opponent seemed to be making no difference in the polls. The Republican incumbent was not showing up for debates, not raising money, and hardly seeking to represent the voters in the state.

Walker's advisers worked with their counterparts on the Democratic campaign to run polls to figure out whether there would be a path to victory if one of the challengers dropped out. On

¹¹¹ Ballotpedia data provided to Unite America.

¹¹² Myers, Adam. "[Why the 2018 elections may bring a surge in state legislative competition](#)", LSE USCentre (May 2018)

September 2nd, Byron Mallott agreed to drop out of the race for governor and join Walker on a “Unity Ticket” as his lieutenant governor nominee.

“It’s hard in political life to ask for this because of recent — of a long history. But we’re trying to change that! And I ask you to trust me. Look at my record. Look at what I say. At the actions I take. I cannot do anything more,” said Mallot at the time. The pair went on to win by a 3 point margin, forge a friendship rooted in trust, and govern together for years to come.

Two days after Mallot joined Walker’s ticket, Democrat Chad Taylor dropped his candidacy for U.S. Senate amid growing pressure from the majority of Kansans who did not approve of the job the incumbent Republican, Pat Roberts’ was doing.

One commentator observed:

“In a three-way matchup between Taylor, Roberts, and Orman, [polling showed] Roberts was in the lead, as could be expected given Kansas’ strong Republican voting base. Roberts was also the front-runner in a one-on-one matchup against Taylor. But, when Orman, a former Democrat, was matched up against Roberts alone, Orman led by a significant margin.

This curious set of results can be explained by two simple observations: Pat Roberts is incredibly unpopular in Kansas, but so is the national Democratic Party. Twenty-seven per cent of Kansans approve of Roberts's job performance; but only thirty-three per cent approve of President Obama's performance. That leaves a lot of votes up for grabs for someone who is neither a Democrat nor a Republican.”¹¹³

Orman, however, was swiftly pigeonholed by a tribal system, with voters and members of the media keen to know who he would caucus with, and in the final weeks of the race faced an onslaught of negative campaign ads. Ultimately, Orman came up short with 43% of the vote.

- **RUN IN A TOP-TWO PRIMARY.** Three states offer an opportunity for independents to advance to the general election ballot by placing first or second in a “blanket” primary. A few political independents have been elected in Louisiana in the last decade and a few others have come very close in Washington and California.

In 2018, Steve Poizner nearly became the first ever independent elected to statewide office when he ran for California insurance commissioner and earned 47% of the vote, placing him well ahead of any other second place challenger. After advancing through a primary against two Democrats and one Republican, he leaned on his past experience and vast personal resources to drive his name recognition on the ballot.

¹¹³ Wang, Sam. “[Why a Democrat Quitting the Race in Kansas Helps the Party’s Chances at Keeping the Senate](#),” *The New Yorker* (Sept 2014).

Other independent candidates have come close in recent general elections, including: Dr. Ann Diamond who earned 43% in WA LD-12 in 2018, Paul Leone who earned 49% in CA AD-52 in 2013, and Bill Bloomfield who earned 46% in CA CD-33 in 2012.

- **RUN IN A PARTY PRIMARY.** For the first time, political independents in Alaska were permitted to run in the Democratic primary in 2018. Alyse Gavin seized the opportunity, running as an independent and winning the nomination. Instead of joining the party, she maintained her political independence and nearly beat a 30+ year incumbent in a safely conservative district.

ONCE IN A TWO WAY-RACE, DON'T GET FRAMED AS A PARTISAN

In two-way races, independents still face the challenges of building personal identities, clarifying their policy positions, and building winning coalitions. These coalitions usually must include voters who traditionally support the party without a candidate, swing voters, and moderates from the party with a nominee.

It follows that the best strategy for the incumbent party candidate is to frame the independent as a partisan in disguise. In response, independents must demonstrate their broad appeal and desire to represent everyone in the district.

In Arizona, independent Kathy Knecht was accused by Republican opposition groups and independent voters of being a closet liberal, despite being registered as an independent for 23 years, and serving 12 years on her local school board as a non-partisan member. In southwest Colorado, local party leaders rallied Democratic-base support for their candidate by sharing in private Facebook groups that her opponent, independent Paul Jones, was supported by Republican donors like the Mercer family — a claim with no grounding in fact. Post-election polling shows how the two independent candidates, Kathy Knecht and Paul Jones, fared across the political spectrum:

table 21

ARIZONA LD-21 RESULTS

BY PARTY AFFILIATION

| Arizona LD-21 ¹¹⁴ | Amongst Democrats | Amongst Independents | Among Republicans |
|------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Kathy Knecht (I) | 52.9% | 37.8% | 10.9% |
| Rick Gray (R) | 3.9% | 17.7% | 66.9% |
| Left Blank | 24.9% | 23.2% | 7.0% |
| Can't Recall | 18.3% | 21.3% | 16.2% |

Kathy's district had 42% Republican voters and amongst the 15% of independents, 26% leaned toward the Republican Party. While Kathy nearly won with 47% of the vote, she faced a tension between appealing to Democratic voters (at least 25% of whom skipped the race on their ballot) and persuading moderate Republicans to vote for her. ,

table 22

COLORADO HD-59 RESULTS

BY PARTY AFFILIATION

| Colorado HD 59 ¹¹⁵ | Amongst Democrats | Amongst Independents | Among Republicans |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Paul Jones (I) | 9.0% | 28.7% | 56.9% |
| Barbara McLachlan (D) | 88.6% | 53.5% | 11.8% |
| Left Blank | 0.9% | 6.2% | 17.4% |
| Can't Recall | 1.5% | 11.6% | 13.9% |

Of independents in Paul's district, 66% said they leaned toward the Democratic Party. The post-election poll results show he made little progress persuading Democratic-leaning independents or independents.

Independent candidates in two-way races must work hard early to not be pigeonholed by the media, community stakeholders and — most importantly, local party activists and leaders — as being an independent in sheep's clothing.

¹¹⁴ Unite America. "Arizona Senate District 21 Post Election Survey" *Triton Polling and Research* (2018).
Poll conducted amongst 415 AZ LD 21 voters from 11/15-11/21/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.8%.

¹¹⁵ Unite America. "Colorado House District 59 Post Election Survey" *Triton Polling & Research* (2018)..
Poll conducted amongst 400 CO HD 59 voters from 11/9-11/18/18 with a margin of error of +/- 4.9%.

Dr. Ann Diamond (WA, LD-12) demonstrated how independents can combat this argument in the press. In an interview with a popular online periodical in her state, she emphasized (i) she would not caucus with either party if elected (ii) that, like her, one in three voters in her district were independent and (iii) shared her motivation to run was sparked when she was approached about a health policy issue, on which she worked with the chairwoman of the state's health committee.

The resulting headline: “A Democrat won’t win in central WA, but can an independent?”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Stang, John. “[A Democrat won’t win in central WA, but can an independent?](#)”, *Crosscut* (Oct. 2018).

Best Practice #6: In three-way races, treat August like November

Independent candidates in three-way races consistently noted the importance of raising their profiles as early as possible. Without strong name recognition, independents struggle to gain traction in the media, with pollsters and, most importantly, voters. Independent campaigns should treat August as their November, spending more of their budget and time earlier in the election than traditional candidates.

An initial poll conducted by Tulchin Research in May 2018 found Greg Orman held 22% support amongst likely Kansan voters, trailing Kris Kobach (32%) and Laura Kelly (32%).¹¹⁷ Jim Jonas, a political consultant who managed an independent expenditure committee supporting Orman, noted had the committee been able to spend its intended target budget of \$6 million — to compete with millions spent to support Kobach and support Kelly — there would have been a path to victory.

“When I heard the percentage points for Marty Grohman, then I sort of pushed him aside. If I’d heard a greater percentage, if he’d had more TV ads, more support, and then a greater percentage, I would have taken more interest in him. **I can’t imagine what he’s supposed to do other than have a ridiculous amount of money.**”

- Maine Voter

“Stronger show of support [earlier in the campaign] might have **helped boost sense of viability** and scare off opponents.”

- John Henry Heckendorn | Campaign Manager, Governor Walker

“**Our only chance of victory was dependent upon getting over voter skepticism and having a position from where we could win.** We gave it a go. Realistically, I now believe that winning this Senate campaign in Maryland required \$10 million plus \$5+ million of independent expenditures.”

- Neal Simon | Independent Candidate, Maryland U.S. Senate

“My advice to future independents is that **they must run during the primary as if they were on the ballot.** Waiting until Labor Day to spend on paid media is months too late to shape the narrative.”

- Kyle Bailey | Campaign Manager, Hon. Terry Hayes

¹¹⁷ Grow Kansas. “Kansas Gubernatorial Poll.” *Tulchin Research* (July 2018).
Poll conducted from 7/5-7/11/18 with 400 respondents.

Best Practice #7: Invest in ground game early, and never stop

If there's one recommendation with the broadest consensus amongst 2018 independent candidates and operatives, it is that **money and people** are the two most valuable commodities for an independent candidacy.

While candidates can control how much money they raise by being disciplined about how much time they spend on the phone, extending beyond comfort zones to ask their networks to pitch in, and by investing time to plan events, those challenges are ones that all candidates face. In order to compete with the two parties, the biggest fundraising gap to be closed must be the national donor network of large investors committed to supporting a new brand of candidate, a challenge no single candidate is likely to be able to solve.

What individuals can control, however, is how they invest both the time and money they do have. Statewide campaigns regretted not being able to — or choosing not to — invest earlier in regional directors capable of building volunteer and grassroots momentum in different parts of the state. State legislative candidates found door-to-door voter contact to be the easiest way to connect with their constituents and secure votes. Investing in volunteer recruitment is especially important because independent candidates do not have pre-existing volunteer networks like the parties do.

While leveling ballot access requirements remains a task for independents broadly, candidates who collected signatures noted how powerful the act could be in securing support. Kate Harris, an independent candidate in a New Hampshire district where only 2,024 votes were cast, wished she had started collecting signatures earlier so she could have gone *over* the required number; the simple act of petition-signing rallied voters behind her. Neal Simon, the independent candidate for U.S. Senate in Maryland, noted the campaign did better in the places it focused its signature-gathering efforts.

Many candidates remarked hiring others, especially canvassing firms providing talent from outside the district, did not return nearly as much value. Instead, they suggested spending more time organizing volunteers and paying local college students, both of whom are more likely to become invested in and passionate about the candidate's message.

For independents who need to build a personal brand and actually persuade — not just turn out — voters, canvassing with both an intriguing personal story and specific policy priorities is essential to a successful campaign.

“I enjoyed the experience of running much more than I expected. Knocking on doors to get my nomination papers signed and then, once on the ballot to meet and share my mission with voters was actually interesting and fun.”

- Kate Harris | Independent Candidate, NH State House

“I personally knocked on about 5,000 doors. In those areas that I knocked, I received 15% of the vote [Hofstein earned 10% of the vote district wide]. I went to every event I was invited to, responded to every email [and] request... and even put my phone number on billboards around town.”

- Daniel Hofstein | Nevada HD - 35

“Every time Ann [Diamond] stood in front of a group, people wrote checks to the campaign.”

- Betsy Cushman | Campaign Manager, Dr. Ann Diamond

“Every day and weekend I knocked doors. We did about 10k doors, with about 40-50% answered.”

- Ray Ranker | Independent Candidate, MD HD - 21

“I was the newcomer so I had to work much harder than my opponent...Now that I have a pretty sizeable support base I think I'd work harder to try to get people to contact their friends and neighbors and talk me up. “

- Anne Gass | Independent Candidate, ME HD - 67

“I think people were receptive to that [me becoming an independent]. Going door to door there was a very negative response to our divided country because of party politics and being put into a box.”¹¹⁸

- Jim Roscoe | Independent Candidate, WY HD - 22

¹¹⁸Cottier, Cody. “[Roscoe defies history to win as independent](#)”, *Jackson Hole Daily* (Nov 2018).

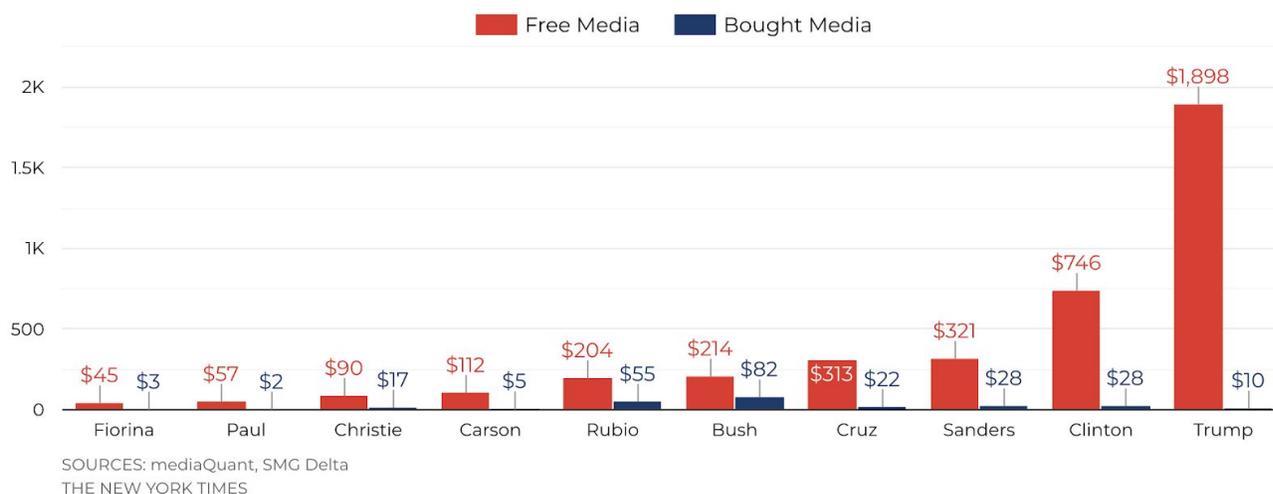
Best Practice #8: Spend time cultivating authentic relationships and having real conversations with reporters.

During his 2016 campaign, President Donald Trump attracted more than \$5.6 billion in free earned media, more than Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Paul Ryan, and Marco Rubio combined.¹¹⁹ The power of media outlets — both national, regional, and local — to shape the narrative of a race and raise the profile of a candidate has perhaps never been greater.

figure 10

EARNED VS BOUGHT MEDIA

AMONG 2016 PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES



At the same time, outlets are being blamed for our divisive politics, and rarely invite independent, moderate and level-headed voices to join panels hosted by the 24/7 cable news networks. The fact that the media has so much power yet ignores independent candidates presents a tough challenge.

Speaking to independent candidates at an August 2018 summit, former A.P. Bureau chief Ron Fournier suggested the only way to break this cycle is to break bread with local reporters. He suggested independent candidates engage members of the media and ask them to find time for coffee or lunch, a time that would allow candidates to share their personal stories and motivations for joining the race.

In surveys, candidates who reported direct 1:1 outreach to papers, radio stations, and television outlets in their districts were much more likely to receive favorable press coverage. Just a week after reaching out to and meeting with local press, Daniel Hofstein, an independent candidate in Nevada, saw his first three pieces of earned media come through at a critical, late stage in the campaign.

¹¹⁹ Stewart, Emily. “[Donald Trump Rode \\$5 Billion in Free Media to the White House](#)”, *The Street* (2016).

In Alaska, Governor Walker’s team focused on placing supporter letters in local news outlets, which told stories about the governor while constantly pitching new angles to reporters. In Maine, Hon. Terry Hayes’ campaign team worked tirelessly to place Op-Eds from supporters in local papers all across the state that emphasized her civility and bipartisanship, a critical message as the airwaves were filled with negative ads against her.

Unite America senior strategist Joel Searby noted statewide candidates should hire a 2-3 person team at least two weeks before launching their campaigns in order to ensure enough time to plan credible launch events, organize supporters to attend and — most importantly — get buy-in from local and national reporters to cover the events.

“The press was also an obstacle. Our message does not fit into their narrative about the tribal warfare between the two parties. “

- Neal Simon | Independent Candidate, Maryland U.S. Senate

“We sent out press releases, but only had two bites total, partly because we had no relationships.”

- Ray Ranker | Independent Candidate, MD HD - 21

“Our hooks and strategies centered mostly on the personal bios of the candidates along with the abundant national research on the disgust with the major parties. The press was very in tune with that narrative and eager, I believe, to write on it.”

- Joel Searby | Senior Strategist, Unite America

CONCLUSION & UNITE AMERICA'S FUTURE

WHY INDEPENDENTS

Born a movement of Republicans, Democrats, and independents, Unite America's mission is to improve governance by bridging our country's partisan divide. To date, our strategy has focused on electing independents because we believe in the transformative impact they can have on our political system.

We knew it would be, and will remain for the foreseeable future, harder to elect independent candidates to local, state, and federal office. Yet a cornerstone of the strategy has been that, if elected, the payoff would be greater because they would be able to truly govern independently, think for themselves, and find common ground. In a post-election column, independent Greg Orman put it best when he described why he stayed in the race for Governor in Kansas despite long odds:

“I believe the most important issue facing our nation is a dysfunctional two-party system that values self-preservation over everything else and is allowing the greatness of our country to slip away. It's preventing meaningful progress on so many issues that I care deeply about, including climate change, but also our burgeoning national debt, immigration policy, income inequality, and wage stagnation, to name a few.

It's a system set up to perpetuate itself, one that places the needs of the parties themselves and the special interests above the interests of Americans. As a result, parties have become nothing more than aggregation points for special interests that are engaged in a never-ending war. The American people are the casualties.

Because I believe the most important issue facing us as Americans is our destructive and self-perpetuating two-party system, I was not willing to join it in the service of personal advancement.”¹²⁰

For those reasons and more, Unite America placed a high-risk, high-reward bet on independents in 2018.

HYPOTHESIS & REFLECTIONS

In 2018, Unite America's electoral strategy — and that of many independent campaigns — rested on a few core assumptions:

- Given increased polarization and dysfunction, a growing plurality of voters would be willing to support candidates outside of the two parties;
- Gaining access to competitive electoral infrastructure — primarily campaign talent, financial resources, and voter data — would sufficiently level the playing field with major party

¹²⁰Orman, Greg. “[Why I Remained an Independent Candidate](#)”, *Real Clear Politics* (2019).

candidates;

- Independent candidates would be most successful in two-way races where they could win the vast majority (80%+) of voters from the party without a candidate as well as a majority of independent voters.

We learned each of these assumptions may have been flawed, or at least incomplete:

- Rather than vote against the two-party system and support independent candidates, a growing segment of the electorate cast their ballots even more strongly against one of the two parties — in 2018, that was virtually all Democrats and many independents voting *against* Republicans;
- Even where independent candidates came close to leveling the playing field from an infrastructure standpoint, they remained in the single digits — as psychological barriers to voting for an independent candidate significantly trumped structural ones;
- Perhaps most importantly, we dismissed the idea held by many political scientists that most independent voters were “closet partisans” because it seems reasonable most of these voters would have a consistent preference when given a binary choice; yet in key races, even when given a new, third choice, a majority of independent voters stuck with partisan candidates.

THE RESULTS

In 2018, Unite America came up short of both aspirations and expectations. The races the organization invested most in — two-way state legislative races — proved steeper hurdles than we hypothesized, especially because candidates we endorsed lost a substantially larger share of independent voters than we imagined they would. Across the country, statewide candidates in three-way races — whom we wished we could have supported more — came up against the political reality that many voters dissatisfied with the system are not willing to leave their tribes in high-stakes elections.

Ultimately, both the political environment and political realities that manifested themselves in 2018 have shown the barriers to independent candidates to be higher than we assumed. So while we wish we found greater electoral success and recognize we could have performed better, we have no regrets about testing an important hypothesis about what may be possible in our politics today and how to fix a deteriorating and polarizing political system.

The silver lining is that along the way, we raised \$3.5 million from 2,708 unique donors, recruited 450+ volunteers, and organized 43 Unite chapters. We also built or partnered with seven state-based organizations and connected candidates to tools, talent, and technology necessary to run effective campaigns. We reached 1.7 million voters online and cultivated a community of over 100 independent leaders who remain leaders in their communities.¹²¹

¹²¹ Unite America, [In the Arena: A Recap of the 2018 Election Cycle](#) (Dec 2018).

Virtually everyone who has joined the movement remains eager to iterate on, and broaden if necessary, our current strategy in a way that maximizes our impact. The question now before us is: how can we best leverage the foundation we laid in 2018 to make an impact in the elections to come?

REVISITING OUR THEORY OF CHANGE

In the 2013 book which launched our movement, *The Centrist Manifesto*, Dartmouth professor and Unite America co-founder Charles Wheelan describes a vision for achieving better policy outcomes for America by bridging the partisan divide — specifically by electing a “fulcrum” of pragmatic problem-solvers to the U.S. Senate.

Early on, we learned a third party was not viable because of the huge startup costs that were unlikely to be overcome without defections from highly regarded elected leaders from the major parties and/or the intervention of one or more mega-donors. We shifted to supporting independent candidates, first at the congressional level in 2016 and then at the state level in 2018. We have yet to define a sustainable model of electoral success.

Yet, while Unite America was focused on electing independent candidates in 2018, a few notable things happened during and after the election:

- Voters passed 10 out of 11 statewide ballot measures explicitly designed to curb partisan and special interest power in the political system.¹²² Voters in Colorado, Michigan, and Utah approved independent redistricting commissions; voters in North Dakota, Missouri, and Massachusetts passed ballot measures focused on the role of money in politics; automatic voter registration will now be used in Nevada and Michigan.
- A bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus worked to draft a common-sense legislative rules package to overhaul how the U.S. House Representatives governs itself. The caucus committed to only voting for a speaker who endorsed the rules changes, no matter which party won the speaker’s gavel. And it worked.

On January 3rd, Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) was elected Speaker and shortly thereafter oversaw the passage of a meaningful upgrade to the House rules.¹²³ This break through followed a primary election season in which No Labels supported 17 Republican and 17 Democrat problem-solvers in party primaries. Of the 34 candidates they invested in, 25 won.¹²⁴

- During the 2018 legislative session, two independent Alaska state representatives caucused with five moderate Republicans and the Democratic minority to form a bipartisan majority coalition

¹²² [“Represent.US “2018 Election Results”](#) *RepresentUS* (webpage viewed: Feb 2019).

¹²³ Hawkings, David [“Democrats Seek a 'Reform' Label With Their House Rules”](#), *The Firewall* (Jan 2019).

¹²⁴ Jacobson, Nancy, [“The Truth About No Labels”](#), *Real Clear Politics* (Dec 2018).

that tackled the state’s ongoing fiscal crisis, took steps to address climate change, and reformed the state’s criminal justice system.

Following the 2018 election, three courageous leaders in the Republican Party refused to join their parties’ caucus, instead seeking to form a coalition of common-sense legislators committed to advancing real policy solutions.¹²⁵ After over 30 days of legislative stalemate,¹²⁶ they were joined by five Republican colleagues, two independents and the house Democrats to form a bipartisan governing coalition, with one of the independents serving as Speaker and committees chairmanships being divided between pragmatic leaders from both major parties.¹²⁷

These developments suggest two key takeaways from 2018:

1. **THERE IS AN APPETITE FOR POLITICAL REFORM.** State constitutional amendments and referenda give voters a choice between yes and no, instead of between Republican and Democrat. Insulated from the tribal “us” versus “them” politics and circumventing gridlocked legislative chambers, ballot measure campaigns that tackle corruption and partisanship are gaining momentum.
2. **THE FULCRUM STRATEGY CAN WORK, EVEN AMONG DEMOCRATS AND REPUBLICANS.**

Whether they be members of a third party, political independents, reform-oriented members of the two major parties, or a combination of the three, our central thesis still holds: a coalition of common-sense legislators committed to working and caucusing together can surface the best ideas on substantive policy issues, introduce those ideas as legislation, and sign them into law.

These takeaways argue for a refined strategy in 2020 and beyond, one that:

- **PRIORITIZES WHAT IS POSSIBLE AND IMPACTFUL IN THE SHORT-TERM** — namely, accelerating reform ballot measures and supporting reformers *within* both parties;
- **NARROWING SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES TO WHERE THEY CAN BE VIABLE** — namely, in two-way races and/or where they have outsized name recognition;
- **WORKING TO EXPAND WHERE INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES CAN BE VIABLE IN THE LONG TERM** — namely by organizing a voter base around a new identity, building stronger electoral infrastructure, and advancing Ranked Choice Voting.

¹²⁵ Kitchenman, Andrew, Alaska Public Media, and KTOO, “[Rep. Knopp leaves Republican caucus, seeks new bipartisan coalition](#)”, *Alaska Public Media* (Dec 2018).

¹²⁶ Brooks, James, Anchorage Daily News, “[Alaska House deadlock continues, but ‘Group of Eight’ offers possible fix](#)”, (Jan 2019).

¹²⁷ Kitchenman, Andrew. “[Multi-partisan House majority takes shape](#)” *Alaska Public Radio* (Feb 2019).

Both our immediate plans and long-term vision requires a larger, more robust, and better resourced movement to challenge the status quo and push back against the political extremes. Unite America looks forward to exploring how we can leverage the foundation we laid in 2018 to contribute to that movement.

Recommended Reading

While all the publications referenced throughout the report have been valuable and helpful in shaping our analysis, we highly recommend these works, which are germane to our conceptualization of the challenges and opportunities independents have seen in the past, face today and will encounter in the future, for further reading.

Studies:

Drutman, Lee, Galston, William and Lindberg, Tod, *New America*, “[Spoiler Alert: Why Americans’ Desire for a Third Party are Unlikely to Come True](#)” (Sept 2018).

Gehl, Katherine and Porter, Michael “[Why Competition in the politics industry is failing America](#)” (Sept 2017).

More in Common “[The Hidden Tribes of America](#)” (Oct 2018).

Pew Research Center. “[The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider](#)” (Oct 2017).

Pew Research Center “[Trends in party affiliation among demographic groups](#)” (March 2018).

Books:

Avlon, John. *Washington's Farewell: The Founding Father's Warning to Future Generations* (2017).

Dalton, Russel. *The Apartisan American: Dealignment and the Transformation of Electoral Politics* (2012).

Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2013).

Haidt, Jonathan and Lukianoff, Greg. *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (2018).

Killian, Linda. *The Swing Vote: The Untapped Power of Independents* (2012).

Mann, Thomas and Ornstein, Norman. *It's Even Worse Than It Looks Was: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (2016).

Mason, Lilliana. *Uncivil Agreement: How politics became our identity* (2018).

Orman, Greg. *A Declaration of Independents: How We Can Break the Two-Party Stranglehold and Restore the American Dream* (2016).

Westen, Drew. *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (2008).

Wheelan, Charlie. *The Centrist Manifesto* (2013).

Columns & Articles:

Bump, Philip. “[How often do third-party candidates actually spoil elections? Almost never.](#)”, *Washington Post* (Oct 2014).

Hartig, Hannah and Perry, Stephanie. “[Millennial poll: Strong majority want a third political party](#)”, *NBC News* (Nov 2017).

Orman, Greg. “[Why I Remained an Independent Candidate](#)”, *Real Clear Politics* (Jan 2019).

Stephens, Bret. “[Howard Schultz Derangement Syndrome](#)”, *New York Times* (Feb 2019).

Troiano, Nick and Wheelan, Charlie. “[Run, Howard, Run](#)”, *Washington Post* (Jan 2019).

APPENDIX

In surveys, independent candidates also shared small campaign tactics they wanted to pass along to the next generation of leaders. A full library, including interviews and advertisements from the 2018 election cycle, can be found at uniteamerica.org/2018candidates.

A select few fun tactics from independent candidates around the country:

- Kate Harris drove an old, red convertible around her small district throughout the campaign. The large campaign logo on the car doors stood out, which made her memorable.
- Daniel Hofstein had recently published a book about an issue he felt passionate about: preparing students for the real world. He made a unique copy of the cover for the campaign, and handed it out at every door he knocked. His recommendation is that future candidates hand out something practical and informative to their voters. Care about a water shortage? Hand out a water bottle. Care about protecting the environment? Hand out a reusable grocery bag.
- In Alaska, each time Jason Grenn had a conversation with voters at their door, he wrote two thank you notes. The first was sent that day thanking the voters for their time. The second was sent just a few days before election day reminding the voters about their conversation and the importance of voting.
- Terry Hayes did a weekly “design your own yard sign” contest, asking supporters from around the the state to build their own yard signs and send in pictures. Not only did she save money on yard signs, she gave Mainers eager to help her campaign something concrete to work on, all while creating unique content for social media.
- Cory Ann Ellis brought dog treats with her when door knocking. Doing so endeared her to her neighbors and their furry companions!
- Many independent candidates shared that simply emailing local reporters with an email subject line “Let’s get coffee and chat” allowed them to overcome an often rational skepticism by the media that independents are not serious contenders with concrete policy ideas.
- Cory Ann Ellis and Daniel Hofstein used Every Door Direct Mail, which may be a good option for candidates looking to reach every voter, especially in small districts where it is low cost and targeting data is not available.
- Hofstein: “I stood at one location and had volunteers at another few locations. At my location, we earned 25% of the vote in a precinct on election day, which was the highest among any location.”

- Marty Grohman’s final debate format afforded him the option of asking a tough question of each of his opponents. He opted not to do so, and instead gave a physical gift from the district to each opponent that complemented his compassionate and problem solving messages.
- Senator Angus King’s campaign focused online digital advertising on direct-to-camera narratives about why individuals were supporting King’s independent bid. These individuals included regular voters, campaign volunteers, other elected officials, and community leaders.
- Kathy Knecht hosted a launch party in which she asked her Democratic friends to wear blue, her Republican friends to wear red, and her independent friends to wear white. The resulting photo demonstrated her commitment to representing everyone in her district and became a powerful storytelling tool.
- In Maryland, Neal Simon rented and branded a bus which he took to all 34 counties in Maryland. His “listening tour” earned media attention and allowed Neal to demonstrate his commitment to representing everyone in his state, no matter location or political identity.
- In Arizona, Kathy Knecht hosted a volunteer event to write thank-you notes to each of the 2,000 people who signed the petition to get her on the ballot.
- Marty Grohman, a former business leader in the roofing industry, found fundraising success by soliciting contributions from the National Roofers Association by focusing on an issue that matters to the organization: immigration reform. This approach complements our finding that candidates must hone in on the policy issues that matter most to varying constituencies.
- Ray Ranker placed over 700 yard signs across his district in Maryland. In Colorado, the Unite Colorado team found asking voters to plant a yard sign was a compelling follow-up while door-knocking. Yard signs still matter insofar as they demonstrate to people who their neighbors are voting for.
- While many sources of voter data remain accessible to independent candidates, NationBuilder was identified as the clearly preferred CRM and digital organizing tool amongst independent candidates, including Senator Angus King and Governor Bill Walker. NationBuilder offers a certified expert training for campaign operatives designed to allow teams to get the most out of the product.¹²⁸
- College students were a useful talent pool for independent candidates in 2018. 71% of millennials agree that we need a third party¹²⁹. Independent candidates found college students’ passion for activism and political engagement often made them stronger petition gatherers and canvassers than employees of traditional voter-contact firms.

¹²⁸ Reference https://nationbuilder.com/experts_apply, for NationBuilder Expert Certification information.

¹²⁹ Hartig, Hannah and Perry, Stephanie. “[Millennial poll: Strong majority want a third political party](#)”, *NBC News* (Nov 2017).